Hans Julius Schneider*

Sacred Values and Interreligious Dialogue

Abstract: The paper develops a perspective on religion that is inspired by William James' concept of religious experience and by the philosophy of language of the later Ludwig Wittgenstein. It proceeds by naming basic steps leading to the proposed conception and by showing that none of them must be a hindrance for a substantial understanding of religion. Among the steps discussed are the acceptance of non-theistic religions, an existential version of functionalism, and the acceptance of the possibility of non-literal truths about the human condition. Furthermore, it proposes a way to interpret the expression 'the sacred' in the given framework. Finally it points out two contradictory necessities that make interreligious dialogue difficult: In the beginning one has to use an abstract vocabulary in order not to exclude any positions, but on the other hand one has to avoid robbing the participants of the means for articulating their specific religious views.

1 Introduction

The title of this paper signals a dilemma about which common sense demands a decision: Either (a) we want to take religion seriously. This seems to imply that we are ready to speak of a special realm, traditionally called *the sacred*. What is situated in this realm has an encompassing importance. It is not a means to some outside end, but rather it might be called the end of all ends. It is precious in a special way; it is not negotiable. Or (b) we want to engage in interreligious dialogue, i.e. we want to understand forms of life and of thinking about life that are as yet foreign to us, and we hope to thereby learn something about the human condition, which often means to learn something about ourselves.

But serious dialogue about religious matters presupposes that the parties concerned are able and willing to have their deepest convictions questioned, with no topics excluded. And here the dilemma occurs: Is it not one of the main functions of the word *sacred* to signal just such exclusion, to signal that there is something

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*Corresponding Author: Hans Julius Schneider, Institut für Philosophie, Universität Potsdam, Am Neuen Palais 10, 14469 Potsdam, Germany, e-mail: Hans.Schneider@uni-potsdam.de

that is not negotiable? So how can the concept of the sacred be retained when we engage in honest and truly open attempts to practice interreligious communication? Does not the idea of Enlightenment demand that there be no taboos?

This paper will sketch the outlines of a philosophical understanding of religion that tries to overcome this dilemma. It will proceed by naming and discussing a number of steps that together are setting the course for it. And it will consider for each of these steps, firstly, why it could be perceived as creating a stumbling block, i.e. a barrier that makes the proposed approach difficult to accept for some readers. And secondly it makes an attempt to show how each of these potential stumbling blocks might be interpreted in such a way that it will no longer be a hindrance. The perspective of the following considerations will be philosophical throughout. It will not be the perspective of any particular religion.

2 Theistic and Non-theistic Religions

The first strategic step is to include into our considerations the possibility of non-theistic religions. The primary reason for doing so can be seen in the goal we have set: We want to spell out the conditions for interreligious dialogue in an unbiased way. No world-religion should be excluded for the sole reason that in its teachings we do not find a personal god in the sense familiar to us from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. So our step of opening the discussion to non-theistic religions is meant as a step away from Ethnocentrism. Such a step should not be a hindrance for anyone seriously interested in interreligious dialogue.

A prominent example for a non-theistic religion is Buddhism, and in our context it is interesting to note that it was this trait that had appealed to modern thinkers in the various historical waves of interest through which Buddhism became better known in the West. Some western philosophers found it easier to approach the whole subject matter of religion via this non-theistic path, rather than on their own cultural grounds of Christianity, because for them it seemed that on this path they would not have to sacrifice their critical intellect. When starting the inquiry with the problem of the existence or non-existence of the monotheistic god, on the other hand, the danger of bringing a *sacrificium intellectus* seemed to be more acute. So one reason for the interest that Buddhism found in the West was its perceived closeness or at least its non-oppositional relation to forms of thinking that strive for a type of rationality as it is exemplified by the sciences (cf. Lopez Jr. 2008).

Indeed it seems to be a fact that for some people it is easier to take the first steps of approaching religion when the question of theism is postponed. We often

find that in philosophical discussions it can be helpful to put the question of god's existence not at the beginning of a discussion of religion, but rather at its end. When we proceed in this order, the impression is avoided that as long as we do not have a *proof* for god's existence (which is notoriously difficult if not impossible to provide) it would be pointless to even make the first steps. In contrast, if we begin by trying to make sense of the concept of a *spiritual life*, even without gods, it might not take much of an elaboration to find out that it is not so difficult after all to understand what talking about gods (or about the one god) may mean, regardless of the possibility of proving his existence. In this way, a proof of god's existence can no longer be seen as a condition that has to be satisfied before one can even begin a discussion about religion. This is in accordance with the way in which William James (1982[1902], 513–516) is proceeding when he starts his enquiry with a description of *religious experiences* and only after this adds his own 'over-belief' (which he himself declares as optional), namely that the expression *god* signifies what is the *cause* of such experiences. We might add here that the work of James is one of the main inspirations for the approach taken here (cf. Schneider 2006).

What are the possible dangers of the step to admit non-theistic religions? As has already been mentioned, it would be a grave misunderstanding if this step were taken as a criticism of those religions that do use a theistic language. The spectrum of what we have to consider is enlarged by this step; it is not diminished. To open a new and to some thinkers unfamiliar perspective does not mean to criticize or forbid more traditional and more familiar ways of looking at religion.

As a bridge to the (for us) less familiar form of a non-theistic religion it might be pointed out to adherents of theistic religions that, although god is treated by them in many respects as a person, it is very clear in the theistic traditions that *god the creator* is not at all a person like the neighbor next door. Strictly speaking, so one could argue, he is incomparable to human beings, and the kind of being he is, cannot really be grasped by us. This is a point often made by Christian mystics, with the result that they were said to be atheists without themselves knowing this (Hume 1947[1779], 159). But if we feel that this accusation is not justified, stressing the enormous *difference* between man and god can help us to understand that there are religious conceptions that go just one step farther: They not only say that what one can be confronted with in religious experience is in important respects very much *unlike* any of the human persons one knows, but that one can have a religion that is not using the idea of personhood *at all* as a means for articulating the pertinent experiences.

3 Pragmatism

The perspective advocated here can be described as a form of Pragmatism, in the philosophical sense of this term, not in the loose sense of taking as true whatever is useful for oneself in the given situation. One of the roots of this philosophical Pragmatism can be found in attempts to solve certain problems in the theory of meaning. The *pragmatic* understanding of linguistic meaning, as explicated by Charles S. Peirce (1986[1878]), claims that we have to look at the *practical context* in which a word, a doctrine, or a theory is *used* if we want to get at its meaning. So to understand it's meaning is to understand the way in which the word, doctrine, or theory guides human activities. The philosophy of language proposed by the later Ludwig Wittgenstein, that plays a crucial role as one of the backbones of the view advocated in this paper can in this sense be described as a *pragmatic* view of language (for a detailed interpretation cf. Schneider 2014). As is well known, he himself has epitomized his position in the slogan "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 1953, §43).

Meanings of words, according to this view, are not the objects referred to, a fact that is obvious in the case of non-referring but still meaningful expressions like *because*, *and*, etc. Also meanings are not inner pictures or other kinds of representations in the minds of speakers and hearers. Instead, to understand what a word means, is to be able to use it in (typically social) human situations. And in a discussion of religion we have to keep in mind that what we call the *situation* that a human being can be in (or, in a more general perspective that speaks of all human beings: the *human condition*) can be very serious indeed. When we look at the whole of a human life, we see that it inevitably involves being sooner or later confronted with suffering and death. So Wittgenstein's (1953, §7) term *language game* that he uses to characterize the interwovenness of linguistic and non-linguistic activities should not mislead us to think that what he is talking about under this heading is always playful or entertaining.

3.1 Existential Functionalism

It is clear that there can be no interreligious dialogue without making comparisons between the teachings of different religions. For example one can ask: How is the importance and the special human meaning of *death* articulated in a particular religion, especially in connection with our ethical conduct and with our *fear* of death? Can the Christian teaching about a *Last Judgment* and about *Heaven and Hell* meaningfully be compared with the Buddhist teaching about *Rebirth* on dif-

ferent levels of quality, so that to be reborn as a rat or an ant, for example, is seen as less desirable than to be reborn as a human being of high spiritual quality, of the sort expected to be found in Buddhist monks? Is it for example plausible to say that both forms of articulation teach that our conduct here and now makes a difference for the quality our life will have had in retrospect, when we have come close to its end?

If comparisons of this kind are not deemed illegitimate or impossible from the start, this means that we can speak of the *function* that particular teachings have for the human lives they are meant to enlighten and to influence in a positive way, for example by taking away the fear of death. And with this way of speaking we have indicated that we are looking from a pragmatic perspective in the philosophical sense just characterized. Must this perspective be seen as a danger for religion?

The chosen example shows that speaking of its *function* does not necessarily mean that the religious teaching considered in this way is thereby belittled. Discussing their functions renders religious teachings not as less important than they have traditionally been taken to be. Especially, this way of speaking in itself does not mean to make our understanding dependent on motives or circumstances that lie *outside* the scope of themes belonging to religion proper, for example by claiming that religion has no other function than strengthening social cohesion. For Charles Taylor (1981, 194) this is an example of what he calls "finessing" the understanding a member of a foreign culture has of her activities. For our example this means: Both variants of speaking about death, the Christian and the Buddhist, can keep their full existential weight and can still be described as *functional*. It is the function of the respective teachings to help their adherents facing the fact of their mortality, which includes considering the consequences of this fact for the question how they want to live, what they take to be of highest value for them. One can say that in both ways of speaking it is the whole of the person's life that is under consideration, and it is considered from the standpoint of her own deepest aspirations, not from the point of view of another person or a larger social entity for which it might have been useful or useless.

The important point for interreligious dialogue is that speaking of functions and comparing the ways in which different religions treat the same existential predicaments can be done in such a way that the religious teachings keep all the seriousness and weight they have traditionally had. This is why we speak of an *existential functionalism* here.

3.2 The Practical Side of the Religious Life: Why Religion Is More Than Philosophy

At this point it is helpful to formulate a tentative definition of the field. This will show in which respect religions differ from philosophies and will give an additional reason for calling Buddhism a religion, not a philosophy,—a point that sometimes is contested. The proposal put forward here is the following (cf. Schneider 2008, 13): Religions are forms of articulations and of practices that normally have a long history and that, according to their own ambitions, *articulate*, and *practically help* their followers to achieve, an understanding of and an attitude towards human life as a whole which is honest and truthful. This means in particular that it does not close its eyes to life's unpleasant sides, like suffering and death. And last but not least, it entails the promise that to follow its teachings (included what they teach about what is valuable) will bring to the followers a deep form of peace or bliss.

This last point deserves to be stressed here. As James has worked out in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the followers of religious teachings will experience in their lives how these teachings help them or do not help them to master what happens to them. This is a very broad reading of James' term *religious experience* and in this sense all religious persons can be said to have such experiences. In his book, however, James concentrates on the more special moments in which a person has an exceptionally strong feeling of seeing and accepting life as it really is and at the same time being in harmony with it, taking part in an "unseen order" (James 1982[1902], 53). In such a moment the person is able to see not only the happy moments of life as a part of this order, but also suffering and death. And to experience that she is able to view her life in this way is what brings the particular kind of peace to her, which James describes as "a superior denomination of happiness, and a steadfastness of soul with which no other can compare" (James, 1982[1902], 369).

The definition proposed above is meant to be general enough to include all religions: All of them articulate views of what the whole of a human life is or should be, from birth to death. But, compared to philosophies, religions (including Buddhism) are offering something in addition that philosophies, at least in modern times, lack (cf. Hadot 1995). Religions aspire to help their followers to internalize the respective view in such a way that it has practical consequences for how they act and how they perceive what happens to them in the chain of events that constitute their lives. The person concerned is enabled to act in accordance with the religious view transmitted by the respective tradition, and this ability should include that she can accept life as it really is, what at this point means that she can cope with its negative sides, she recognizes and does not suppress them.

This *practical help* on the way to attaining and keeping a certain vision of what life is all about is an important aspect of what religious communities are doing for their members, of religious rites and religious habits. They strengthen the person's ability to in fact live her life as far as possible in agreement with the particular religious vision she shares and they contribute to her ability to live in peace. This practical side of enablement is of no concern for today's academic philosophy but it is an important part of Buddhism, which for this reason should be seen as a genuine religion, not as a philosophy.

4 Against Literalism

A further strategic step towards the conception of religion sketched in this paper is its opposition to Literalism. It opposes the position that demands from the faithful adherents of a religion that they believe in the *literal* truth of its main tenets. Many Christian believers and theologians today regard this as a matter of course that might not even be worth mentioning in our time, but this position is not universally shared. There are considerable numbers of so-called *fundamentalists* who are afraid that giving up Literalism would amount to giving up religious faith altogether. Their efforts to save their religious convictions can be quite emotional and can also be very powerful. They in some cases lead to fanaticism and violence.

Sometimes an attempt is made to justify such attitudes and actions with help of the argument, that what is at stake here is the *sacred*. If what we had remarked in the paragraph about existential functionalism is convincing, such an attempt is not altogether incomprehensible. One can see where the emotional energy comes from: In a certain sense what is at stake is the persons' *whole life* as experienced and understood by them; without this understanding life would become meaningless to them. In this sense one can say that it is their identity that is in danger and they feel that if it is lost, nothing of importance will be left. But we know from our own painful historical experiences that violence is no option as a means to solve problems of the kind we are discussing here.

In order to make visible an alternative to fanaticism as a consequence of taking religion seriously, it is an important theoretical step to make a distinction between literal and other truths, without thereby diminishing the existential importance of the latter ones. With help of this distinction one can see that many religious truths are not (and do not need to be taken as) literal truths in order to fulfill their existential function. This is easy to claim, but it takes some philosophical effort to explain how it is possible to have a deep and life-guiding religious faith, without making the additional claim that at least the most central religious

teachings, such as in Christianity that of the resurrection of Jesus, are *literally* true. Even an educated average church-goer would presumably have problems when she were asked to explain what exactly is wrong in the schoolboy's definition quoted by James (1979[1897], 32): "Faith is when you believe something that you know ain't true." How can you bring yourself to believe something of which you would nevertheless say that it is not true?

It would be unnecessarily hasty and not really helpful to immediately evade the problem by speaking of a *secret of faith* here. Intuitively we might rightly feel that at this point different conceptions of truth must be in play so that what *seems* to be a contradiction does not in fact have this character. But what exactly does it mean to speak of two different conceptions of truth, if what is intended should not be a form of Orwellian *doublespeak*? In order to find a solution for this problem we have to consider a few insights that we have already hinted at and that have been developed by Wittgenstein and other authors in the philosophy of language.

4.1 Existence Claims, 'Things', and 'Objects of Discourse'

We can start our discussion with a simple question: Does there exist a prime number between five and nine? The answer is, obviously, yes, the number seven. How is that shown? It is shown by using very elementary arithmetical procedures like counting, making multiplications, divisions etc. The partners arguing about the question must be in agreement about the correctness or incorrectness in the steps that constitute these activities. Extending the *pragmatic* understanding of language explained above to the special case of mathematical language, the proposal is that to *understand* the mathematical expressions is to be able to carry out the relevant mathematical operations in such a way that an agreement is reached with everybody else who has the same abilities. In short: *Knowing how to act* in the mathematical realm is all we need to find the correct answer to the question concerning the existence of a prime number.

So also in the mathematical case we can say: to know the meaning of a concept is to know the way in which using it can guide our activities. The point of the mathematical example is that such activities need not involve an acquaintance with an entity by way of sensual perception. To be acquainted with mathematical entities *means* to be a master of those activities that together define the field of mathematics, there is nothing that would be left out in this approach. Still we can say that the number seven is an *object*; we can say true things about it (for example that it is a prime number). And we can correctly say that it exists.

From this very simple case, situated far outside the domain of religion, we can learn the following: To be an object and to exist does not always mean to be

a *material* object. Therefore we have to insist that there are very different *kinds* of objects and it would clearly be an illegitimate, indeed an ideological move to legislate that only material objects (or, in a broader perspective, objects of science) are objects in a serious sense; why should the objects of mathematics or, to give another example, of literary studies not be called objects in the full sense of the term? So we can see that every realm of knowledge has its own criteria for justifying existence claims, and it is clear that the mathematical procedures convincing us of the existence of a prime number are quite different from the ways used to prove the existence of an object of, for example, astronomy or history, or the existence of irony in a certain literary text.

One way of expressing this on a very general level can be the terminological convention of distinguishing objects in the everyday understanding of *things* from *objects of discourse*. The latter category is the general one and it encompasses everything we can *speak about*. It should be understood in such a way that it includes the ordinary *things*, but also all the other objects of our concerns, like the objects of mathematics, the entities of physics that are designated with help of *theoretical terms*, the objects of psychotherapy, like the *Oedipus Complex*, etc., etc. And of course one can ask what it is that religions make claims about, and the same goes for theologies. For an answer, it is not necessary to refer to sense perceptions.

To be sure, practitioners of each of these fields have to be able to spell out for their context what it means to speak in an intelligible, rational way and to make existence claims good. In its traditional critical role, philosophy insists that they make themselves understood, which means to say that they should not speak in vague or sectarian ways and they should not evade questions. But philosophy cannot reasonably demand that the methods for making intelligible the claims in the respective fields or to meet existence claims be the same in all cases (for a more detailed argument cf. Schneider 2016).

4.2 The Truths of Stories: Literal and Non-literal

We are now prepared to consider linguistic units larger than words and sentences and thereby to move closer to the realm of religions. Especially we have to take a look at *stories* and the ways in which they can *be about* something and can be true in what they say. There are at least two aspects that we have to distinguish here: Firstly we can move on a literal level and say for example that a particular story is about a wedding festivity in a place called Kana, at which astonishing things are reported to have happened, and so on. And, secondly, it is common usage, to speak not only about the *objects and persons mentioned in* the story on the literal

level, but also about the *subject matter* of the story as a whole. This second sense of *aboutness* might be characterized in a first attempt by saying that when we ask what a story is about, we ask for the *point* it is trying to make, or (thinking of religion) we inquire about the *function* of telling it on certain occasions.

Of what kind can answers to such questions be? How can we express what the *subject matter* of a particular story is, not in the literal, but in this second sense; how do we determine whether two stories (possibly quite different and stemming from different cultures) speak about the same subject matter? Again we begin by looking at a simple example outside the field of religion.

In his book *The Uses of Enchantment* the Psychotherapist Bruno Bettelheim (1975) shows his readers that it can be highly important for children of a certain age to hear fairy tales told to them, because in a quite unreflective way they are able to pick up from these tales very important lessons about their situation, lessons that are vital for their mental development. For example, at a certain age a child may typically develop mixed feelings about her mother: She on the one hand loves her as she did before, but on the other hand in certain moments she sees her as wicked and so develops feelings of hate. The child then has difficulties in handling those opposing tendencies that she cannot yet name, and, consequently, cannot discuss with her family in the way in which adult persons are able to do this. Since at the same time she is highly dependent on her elders, she *must* find a way to come to terms with these difficulties, and whether she will be successful in this will largely depend on how the persons around her will react to the behavior she will exhibit as a result of her mixed feelings.

It is Bettelheim's claim that in a situation of this type the child is able to gain important insights from hearing one of the fairy tales in which *two* mothers play a role, like in the tale about *Snow White*: On the one hand there is the real mother, who is unquestionably good. But additionally there is a wicked stepmother, trying to do bad things to the child. So in the story the embarrassing mixture of feelings experienced by the child that produces in her a fear to be punished or abandoned because of her being *bad*, this mixture is sorted out by being cut up in two clearly distinguishable parts. In the fairy tale there are two mother figures. And there are two different feelings that in the context of the story appear as quite appropriate at their respective place.

So one can say that the feelings are *articulated* by the story, i.e. the story provides a name for them and it provides a context to which they belong. The story makes them explicit and thereby determines their identity. Repeating the story can become a means to remember them. Bettelheim says, convincingly, that the *articulation*, the act of distinguishing kinds of feelings with the help of language, enables the child to make a step out of her embarrassment and fear, especially when mother herself tells the story in such a way that it becomes clear that what

the child experiences is the normal course of events, that she is loved all the same and will not be punished, because going through this state of developing negative feelings is the normal course of human life that can be handled by the family in a loving way and therefore does not have to be feared. So the child learns something about the greater context of her situation that is comforting to her; she loses her fears.

Regardless of the details of Bettelheim's account we can learn three important points from his discussion. The first is that stories like fairy tales have a level of meaning that is distinct from and additional to the function they would have if they were taken as historical reports, as descriptions of what had happened somewhere as a matter of fact, so that listening to them would be entertaining, perhaps, but would lack any further reaching significance. And, secondly, it is remarkable that the meaning the story possesses on this second level can be picked up by the child in a direct way, without any special help or preparation, without a hermeneutical theory, quite spontaneously. Of course she must be able to understand the words and the grammar of the language used in telling the story. This enables her to understand the story on the first, the literal level, which in turn is a condition for being able to make the second step of grasping what is said on the second level of meaning. And in Bettelheim's context this second level of meaning is the important one.

Sometimes this second, more-than-literal meaning is called the *symbolic* one, but this is misleading because all language is symbolic. Also the terms *metaphorical* or *analogical* meaning might mislead because for some readers they suggest that the content expressed on this second level could also be conveyed in a non-metaphorical, literal way, and without making use of analogies. But this, as we shall see, often is not the case, neither in Psychotherapy, nor in Religion. Often the respective subject matter of these fields is only accessible via non-literal uses of language. Therefore it seems best to keep the more complicated but less misleading expression and speak of a *second level of meaning*.

We had said that the story as a whole does not only speak (on the first level) about its protagonist, i.e. about the (typically invented) figure playing the central role in the story, like Snow White. But it also *says something* about the situation of the child listening to the story. From hearing the story the child is able to gain an insight into *her own* situation although it is clearly different from that of the protagonist; normally she will not have a stepmother herself, she might not have black hair, etc. This capacity of making use of a story for understanding one's own situation although both situations are in some respects different should be kept in mind when in the next paragraph we will consider the *uses*, not of enchantment (as Bettelheim expresses himself in the title of his book), but *of religious stories*. These must be uses that we as adults are able or unable to make of them. It is a

claim of the view of religion sketched here, that for adults religious stories can be at least as helpful and as existentially important as fairy tales can be for children.

The third point at which we might be able to transfer an insight from Bettelheim's discussion of fairy tales to the field of religion is that for a story to be helpful on the second level of meaning it is not necessary that it be true on the literal level. This strengthens our Anti-Literalism, as discussed above. We can see now that in Bettelheim's case to insist on Literalism would put many of the fairy tales that he shows to be helpful out of his therapeutic reach. They would be excluded because they contain 'lies', Literalism would prevent them from unfolding their existential function. So it is the acceptance of the possibility of a non-literal level of meaning that helps us to see that even fairy tales can convey important *truths about human life*. We will now have to see whether also religious stories can convey truths about human life and so can also be said to be true on a second level of meaning. Only then can it be claimed that we have made a step beyond the schoolboy's definition of faith quoted above, without recourse to Orwellian *double speak*.

4.3 Ordinary Truths, the Truths of Science, and the Truths of Stories

Before we do so, however, we will use the distinction between the two levels of meaning for taking a short look at the relation between what might be called *ordinary truths* of everyday life, on the one hand, and truths of *science* on the other. We will see that this relation differs in important respects from the relation between ordinary truths and the second-level truth of stories, which in turn makes it advisable to distinguish sharply between religious teachings and scientific theories.

We begin by looking at ordinary truths. They are those that concern our practical everyday-affairs. Often they are literal truths for example about the stars to be seen at night, about money or about food. When we turn from them to the truths of science, we can say that these latter ones are results of elaborations of human activities of inquiry that in much simpler forms also occur in our everyday-affairs. For example, astronomy tells us more and in a much more precise manner what is happening in the world of stars, the first idea of which we have formed on the basis of our own observations at night. An analogous point can be made for the relation between economics and the practice of going shopping, or for the relation between chemistry and the art of cooking.

The point to be made here is that in the cases mentioned the *objects* treated can in a broad sense be said to be *the same* in the ordinary and in the scientific case. It is the same sugar that the chemist speaks about and that I use to sweeten my coffee, I see the same star with my naked eye as the astronomer sees with his

telescope, and it is the same money that I have in my purse and that the economist treats in his theories. It is clear that this can be said only in a broad sense and with respect to rather unsophisticated stages in the historical development of a science. The only important point to be observed in our context is that, in the relations mentioned, there is a *continuity* concerning the identity of the *objects*, and consequently there is also continuity on the level of *meaning*. In contradistinction to what we have observed in Bettelheim's discussion of fairy-tales, the sciences can be said to deliver more sophisticated versions of rendering the *same* objects, they are not moving to what in Bettelheim's cases we have been calling the *second level of meaning* on which we encounter new kinds of *objects of discourse*. The astronomer, for example, is obliged to stay on the first level of meaning, the level he shares with the claims a lay-person would make, only what the astronomer has to say is much more accurate and in many ways richer that what a lay-person can say, because the scientific form of description makes its claims in the context of a theory and on the basis of using telescopes with a highly complicated technology.

An attempt of a scientist to breach the ethics of his profession and move to a second level of meaning all the same, will bring him to pseudo-science; in the case of astronomy this will be *astrology*: The astrologer has introduced into his description of the stars an additional, 'symbolic' level of meaning on which he interprets their movements as expressing something about character traits of classes of human persons. In the context of science, this kind of adding a second level of meaning is illegitimate.

Put the other way around this means: When we compare Bettelheim's discussion of the function of fairy tales with what we have just observed about science, we can see that in Bettelheim's case (and possibly in the case of religion) what we had called the *second level of meaning* cannot be described as the result of an *elaboration*, or a kind of *enlargement of the scope* that would take place on the first, the literal level of the story. The fairy tale, on the second level of meaning, does not treat the same objects that have been in view already in a less elaborated, or less artful form before. In this sense there is a *discontinuity* of meanings, and it is this discontinuity that gave reason to speak of two levels of meaning. Stories can open up *new realms altogether*, they do not just treat the ordinary things of everyday commerce in a more sophisticated way, as science does. There are also new realms opened by science, to be sure. But they are new in a different sense. For example they may be realms of very small or very distant objects. But when we take these entities into consideration with help of microscopes and telescopes we stay on the *literal* level of meaning, on the level on which we started.

It is for this reason that it is futile to expect to learn something about the transcendent or sacred realm that *religions* are said to speak about by looking at the latest results for example in the science of cosmology. Cosmology constantly en-

larges the field of what we humans can see and know and it does so with the help of ever more advanced astronomical instruments. With these instruments one can explore new regions of space, one can transcend spatial limits that could not be trespassed in former times. But these instruments cannot transcend *limits of meaning*. They cannot help us to move from the first to a second level of meaning in the sense we have found in the fairy tales. Put in another way and anticipating what will be discussed in the next paragraphs: What is transcendent in the *religious* sense is not something that is very far away in outer space.

5 The Subject Matter of Religious Stories

We will now ask whether the concept of a *second level of meaning* will be of help when it is transferred from fairy tales to religious stories. Spontaneously some readers might be afraid that by taking such a step religious teachings will be downgraded to the caliber of infantile stuff, not worthy of the attention of a mature person. What we have said above about *existential functionalism*, however, should be a warning that also in this case such a dismissal might be too rash. So we will have to take a closer look at what the *objects of discourse* are that religious stories, taken as wholes, are about. What is their *subject matter*, when we read them not on the factual level of places or protagonists? What is it that they are teaching us about this subject matter? And how can we judge whether what they teach is true?

5.1 Answers and Examples Provided So Far

So our first question is: What is the second-level content of *religious* stories that corresponds to what in Bettelheim's case was a particular stressful situation that can typically occur in a child's mental development when she begins to have mixed feelings about her mother? And in looking for an answer we should keep in mind that in the example given the story had the function to help the child to recognize her feelings, to contemplate and understand her situation and and to cope with serious problems; from her own perspective it would be adequate to say: with existential problems.

There were some instances in the development of our argument that in retrospect can be seen as at least partial or preliminary answers to this question. For example, we have spoken of taking into view the *whole of the person's life*, or more generally, the *human condition*. We have spoken of *existential predicaments* that

the members of different cultures share and of the *deepest aspirations* of the persons concerned. As an example for what all human beings have to come to terms with, death was mentioned. Accordingly, for some religious stories we can say that they are *about* the meaning of death for human life. For the individual person this means that she needs to accept her own death as a fact that she cannot escape. And of a religious story we expect that it can help her to do so. So we see that it is not the case that our considerations so far have not provided *any* answers *at all* to the question about the subject matter of religious stories.

There are two things to be noted, however, when we look back in this way. Firstly, it is remarkable that answers of the type just cited are located on a highly abstract level. An expression like *the human condition* may be said to vaguely point for us into a direction rather than to name a specific subject matter. And, secondly, after rehearsing these abstract characterizations, it seems that the difference between Bettelheim's therapeutic concerns and the concerns of religious stories is not that big after all. We will treat this second point first.

The most obvious respect in which religious stories are different from fairy tales is that in the religious case the stories speak about *life as a whole*. They seem to speak from the perspective of an older person who is able to remember periods of her life some of which lie in the distant past, but who is also able to anticipate the future, including the state of old age and of approaching death. In contradistinction, the themes that fairy tales are treating are more specialized; they might be restricted to problems that are specific for a particular, usually an earlier age.

But apart from this difference we can see also much similarity: We had said that in the life of children the stories would have the function to help them to recognize their feelings, to comprehend their situation and to cope with it. But this is also what religious stories should do for adult persons and for the elderly ones, who are able to think about their respective lives as approaching completion. It is hard to think of any reason why not, for young and for old people alike, the situations that the respective stories are about, are perceived as very serious indeed, as of fundamental importance for them, unless one wants to subscribe to the outdated cliché of the naïve and constantly happy child who does not have any serious problems anyway.

5.2 The Constitutive Character of Religious Articulations

We now come back to the first of the two points mentioned above. We had noted that the answers given so far to the question what religious stories are about are located on a very abstract level. What this means can be seen most clearly when we return to the problems of interreligious dialogue and ask: How can we deter-

mine for two stories belonging to two cultures whether they speak (on the second level of meaning) about the same subject matter?

At this point it is helpful to look at some highly pertinent observations made by Taylor. He makes use of the familiar term *conceptual scheme* for expressing in what respects cultures may differ: They are using different *clusters of concepts* or *conceptual schemes* for treating the same or closely related human phenomena. He is aware that speaking this way brings certain dangers and says:

> "We can see this when we ask the question, what does the concept 'scheme' contrast with? The term 'content' is certainly bad, as though there were stuff already lying there, to be framed in different schemes. There is certainly a deep problem here." (Taylor 2002, 293)

Accordingly, Taylor tries to avoid the term *content* and, in an attempt to offer an alternative, he says: "But the notion of two schemes, one target area remains valid and indeed indispensable." (ibd.) So *target area* should replace *content*; it signals a movement in a certain direction. This expression, so we could say, introduces a *pragmatic* aspect that fits well to the approach taken here. It can be taken to express that the subject matter of religious teachings is not fixed and ready; we can hope to get hold of it (as far as we can do this at all) only in repeated attempts, in successive steps to get closer. Other expressions Taylor is using are "facet of our lives" (ibid.) and "dimension, or aspect of the human condition" (Taylor 2002, 294). Facets and dimensions and the way we perceive them may change over time, as the history of religions and theologies testify. So these terms (as Taylor intends them to do) help to avoid the impression that the type of content we are considering would be *given*, independently of our attempts to get hold of it. The proposed terms would also help us avoid being too specific about what exactly it is the members of a *foreign* culture want to express, and in this way they would help us avoid an ethnocentric perspective.

Using the human sacrifices made in the Aztec culture as an example, Taylor asks whether we could speak of their practices as exemplifying a religion. He warns:

> "But the danger is precisely that we happily take on board everything this word means in our world and slide back to the ethnocentric reading of the conquistadores [this is the reading "While we worship God, these people worship the Devil", Taylor 2002, 292]. So we perhaps retreat to something vaguer, like 'numinous', but even this carries its dangers." (294)

With respect to the example, Taylor comes to the conclusion:

> "But that the Mass and Aztec sacrifice belong to rival construals of a dimension of the human condition for which we have no stable, culture-transcendent name is a thought we cannot let

> go of, unless we want to relegate these people to the kind of unintelligibility that members
> of a different species would have for us." (ibid.)

And clearly, this is no option, neither for him nor for the approach advocated here.

So our considerations lead us to the following result: When we attempt to engage in interreligious dialogue, there are two options. Either we work with highly abstract characterizations, i.e. with help of expressions like *the human condition* or sentences like *we all have to die*. In a second step we can (as Taylor is doing in the Aztec case) carefully compare *activities* in the two cultures, in order to find out whether and in what sense we can say that they exemplify different versions of what one is justified in calling religion.

Alternatively, we can try to make use of concepts, and other linguistic means like pictorial expressions and similes, that belong to our own culture and religion, as when for example we speak about a *lost paradise*, about *sin*, about *Job's controversy with God*, or about *the soul having left the body*. These examples show that there is a sense in which one can say that religious articulations have a *constitutive* character for their contents: It is impossible to explain what *sin* means, for example without recourse to a story. The same is true for some psychological *objects of discourse* like the *Oedipus Complex*.

But if this is so, it would be an illusion to think that we could speak about a realm of *the religious* in the sense of a given, preexisting area that could be characterized in a neutral way, independent of all particular cultural traditions, unless we restrict ourselves to the highly abstract level on which we have moved above. Accordingly, we cannot say that all religions are speaking about *it*, about *the religious* or *the numinous* or *the sacred*. To quote Taylor again: "The point is to beware of labels here." (Taylor 2002, 294) Not only on the first level of meaning, on which persons, places, etc. are described, but also on the second level of meaning the *objects of discourse*, if we intend more than a highly abstract sense, are *constituted* by the specific traits of our respective articulations and their long histories. As human beings we have no neutral, *objective* means to refer to them; we have no 'God's-eye view'.

Still, we should not forget that we do have abstract 'signposts' like *the human condition*. And we can see that the impossibility to give a detailed account of the second-level subject matter of religious stories in a neutral language does not hinder us from *making use* of the particular stories that belong to our own tradition and that, on the second level of meaning, are about what cannot be characterized without them. Like the fairy tales can do for children, religious stories can help us adults to articulate and understand the predicaments we find ourselves in and to find a way to come to terms with them. And in our era of globalization it can be helpful to attempt to understand stories that have been developed in foreign

cultures. And we can try to see ourselves in the light of these stories. Again: No literal truth is needed for their being helpful.

6 Religious Experience and the Realm of the Sacred

We will now return to the question of truth and see whether our approach to religion can put up with the provocative definition taken from James and quoted above that "faith is when you believe something that you know ain't true". For our pragmatic perspective, the truth of religious teachings must show in their role in helping us to live, and this in turn is a matter of religious experience, i.e. the experience we make in using them as guidelines for leading our lives, for coping with suffering and death.

Our discussion of topics from the philosophy of language and our discussion of Bettelheim have both shown that truth in religion (in the more than marginal cases) cannot mean the truth of a sentence as related to a simple fact. Instead, it involves what we had called the second level of meaning of whole stories, the subject matter of which is (on the abstract level of description) *the human condition*. So in order to prevent misunderstandings, we might avoid the label *true*, reserving it for the first level of meaning, and, in the case of stories or other larger units, speak of *adequacy* instead. To have faith in a religious teaching then means to see it as providing an *adequate* picture of the human condition. In the beginning such faith will be a kind of trust, when for example as a child we feel that our parents are trustworthy when it comes to handling situations that frighten us. And we have seen from Bettelheim's discussion that to provide an adequate picture in this sense does not necessarily mean to tell a story that is *literally* true, true on the first level of meaning. It must help us to cope; its adequacy is a *practical* matter. In this way Orwellian doublethink is clearly avoided.

When we turn to religious experience now we might remind the reader that we had distinguished two senses in which one might speak of it. On the one hand all religious people will experience in their lives how the particular teachings they are trying to follow help them or do not help them to master what happens to them. On the other hand (and this is James' focus) there are special moments in which a person has an exceptionally strong feeling of seeing and accepting life as it really is. And it is vital for a *religious* experience that at the same time the person feels in harmony with life as seen in such moments, that she feels that her life belongs to an *unseen order*. This includes that she is able to see not only the happy moments of life as parts of this accepted order, but also suffering and

death. And this perception is what brings a particular kind of peace to her, as we had mentioned above.

Relying on a large number of testimonies that he had collected for this purpose, James makes it plausible in his book that it is indeed humanly possible to attain such a mental and emotional state. To believe that this is possible is an important part of religious faith. It can also be described as a kind of *ontological commitment*. James adds that, when they have been strong, typically such experiences have a long lasting effect on the persons concerned. This, of course, does not deny the possibility of moments or longer periods of doubt, or the possibility that a person will completely abandon religious views that she once had cherished. In this case we say that she has *lost her faith*.

There is one trait in James' characterization of religious experience that is of a special importance in our context because it provides a bridge to making use of the word *sacred*. It is the following: A religious experience in James' sense typically is something that will *happen to* the person undergoing this experience. More dramatically one could say: that will *befall her*. It will typically occur after she has given up her attempts to find rescue by way of her own activities. So the change she experiences, her step to the state in which she can see and accept life as it really is and in which at the same time she feels to be in harmony with a higher order,—this step is not the result of her own activity. On the contrary, often it comes as a surprise. If one wants to articulate this aspect of the experience, for members of our culture it is natural to speak of a *gift*: What happened to the person is highly meaningful and immensely welcome, but it is not a result of her own activities or of the intervention of another human being.

The theistic traditions express this by calling it a gift from god, given in an act of grace, and this, ultimately, is also the answer that James himself gives when he states what he calls his own "over-belief", i.e. his own interpretation of religious experience (James 1982[1902], 513; 516). But he makes it clear that other interpretations are possible and legitimate, for example to speak of a *unseen order* only, without considering a person-like actor who is active in this same order and who has created it. The important point is that there is 'something' opposite, person-like or not.

If we now remember the sense in which we had said that in religious controversies we sometimes feel that what is at stake is our *whole life*, our *identity* as a person, our *deepest concerns*, and when we see that there is no culturally neutral, *objective* way to say what the subject matter of religion is, except in a highly abstract manner, so that, when particular questions have to be pondered, we cannot but use the traditional metaphors and pictures,—this is to say: If we have in mind the encompassing scope and personal importance of the religious experiences James speaks about and the fact that they befall us, that they are outside

the reach of our own activities, then it makes sense to say that such an experience brings us in contact with *the sacred*: A higher order of which we feel to be a part, an order that we can experience as meaningful and helpful, an order, however, that has not been instituted by ourselves or by any other human being, and of which we can see that it cannot be accounted for by scientific or other 'neutral' means in any detail. That we are able to feel ourselves as parts of this order, that we are able to accept and even welcome it over longer periods of time, this might (without being rash) now well be called a *secret of faith*.

7 Conclusion

One more remark should be added. If this paper has achieved its goal, it has shown a way of thinking positively about religion, a way that should be acceptable for all readers who bring nothing more to reading it than a philosophically educated common sense. But, without intending it, the paper has also contributed to make visible some of the theoretical reasons why a fruitful interreligious dialogue is not easy to achieve.

The main difficulty seems to be this: For the sake of a wide, inclusive perspective it is necessary to begin such a dialogue on what has above been described as a highly abstract level, on which terms like *the human condition* are at home. Such 'signposts' are helpful for making the first steps, but as soon as more particular problems get into view, it becomes necessary to use a more particular terminology, i.e. a vocabulary belonging to a particular religion, for example, one might want to speak of *sin*. To be able to explain the meaning of this term, say to a Buddhist, one has to tell a story; in our case this might be the story of Adam and Eve.

But now we have to be careful: The recourse to the story must not be understood by the partner using it as thereby claiming literal truth for it, but as a means for communicating something on the second level of meaning, claiming for example something about the nature of human beings. Such a claim may well be articulated in another form, say, with help of a *different* story; also it might be denied, partially or totally.

So we see that what above we had called the constitutive character of religious articulations leads to a situation in which there are two opposite dangers that have to be avoided. The one is to express oneself in such an abstract way as to approach emptiness. The other is that the speaker is so specific about the content she means to express that she is understood as defending literalism, whereas her quite respectable motive is that she does not want to be robbed of the only linguistic means available to her. Discussing a very similar situation, in which under-

standing the other requires one to be willing to make changes in one's own self-understanding, Taylor offers the following consolation to which we have nothing to add here:

> "We may still have a long way to go, but we will have made a step toward a true understanding; and further progress along this road will consist of such painfully achieved, particular steps. There is no leap to a disengaged standpoint which can spare us this long march." (Taylor 2002, 286)

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