

Notto R. THELLE *

Relation, Awareness, and Energy – Three Languages, Three Worlds?: An Approach to Mutual Understanding **

Introduction

“East is East and West is West / and never the twain shall meet.” Rudyard Kipling’s introduction to “The Ballad of East and West” is usually taken as an inevitable conclusion about the intellectual and emotional gap that separates East and West and prevents a meaningful encounter. If one reads the entire poem, however, the conclusion is far more optimistic. When mature and strong people really stand face to face, “there is neither East nor West.”¹

It has been one of my great privileges in life to be involved for many years in religious studies and dialogue with Eastern religious traditions.² As Associate Director of the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions in Kyoto, Japan, I found myself in a wide range of contact with religious traditions. In many ways it became a spiritual pilgrimage, for it was not only academic study and discussion, but also practice and participation in meditation, pilgrimages, and other spiritual ways; contact with new religious movements within Buddhism and other religions; visits, conferences, and friendship. At the same time I was involved in the life of the church, teaching and preaching. With my colleagues and friends I was challenged to reflect on a variety of related questions: “What does it mean to be a church in this culture? What does Christian faith mean to people who are rooted in entirely different spiritual traditions?” This comes in addition to a decade of similar dialogue and study in my own country, Norway, where Christianity is faced with a

* Professor, Oslo University, Faculty of Theology.

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1. In Kipling’s words, “But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth, / When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!”
2. Such expressions as “Eastern” and “Western” are to be taken as popular terms, inaccurate for a critical analysis, but useful as shorthand expressions. In this paper the boundary between East and West goes roughly between India and Pakistan.

multitude of alternative religious ideas and practices, some of them obviously inspired by the East.

Some may wonder about my categories: *relationship*, *awareness*, and *energy*. Are my descriptions of Eastern and Western religions too simplistic – stereotypes that only exist in scholars' minds? Perhaps so, but there is often some truth in stereotypes. My contrasts and comparisons, with all their potential distortions, may clarify some important points, and promote understanding. Afterwards we are free to abandon the stereotypes, add modifications and nuances, and still appreciate their value. What I write in the following should be taken symbolically, not literally.

I might also add that conceptual simplicity does not necessarily preclude depth. Some of the great masters of thought and faith have chosen quite simple categories to develop their ideas. One could mention Buddha's vision of pain, attachment and detachment; Jesus' love of God and love of humans in his unreserved being-for-others; Gabriel Marcel's distinction between *être* (being) and *avoir* (having); the existentialists' view of existence unto death; Martin Buber's description of personal (I-Thou) and impersonal (I-It) relationships; Emmanuel Levinas' ideas of The Other, etc. They are all very simple, but open for quite penetrating analyses of human existence.

I will initially clarify the two first concepts I have chosen by describing some of my own attempts as a Christian theologian to come to terms with Buddhism, focused on two categories: religion as relation and religion as awareness. Then I will add a third category, which gradually appeared to me as an aspect of religion often forgotten by scholars – religion as energy or power or strength.

On the basis of this clarification I will then investigate the further implications of these categories. Even though they have dawned upon me in my own personal search for understanding and meaning, I don't think they are merely of private interest, but may stimulate further reflection on religion in general and on our own faith in particular, if we have one. My thesis is that each category tends to develop a certain type of religious language and commitment, which often prejudices people against other languages and commitments. And, correspondingly, awareness of such predilections may promote dialogue and understanding, and even motivate people to investigate forgotten or ignored aspects of their own faith. In fact, I suspect that any sound religion should have – and potentially does have – a balance of all three conceptual languages and concerns.

I will finally exemplify my point by discussing the meaning of relational language in the context of religious traditions that tend to concentrate on either insight or energy. That may prepare us for further investigation, and perhaps for a sharing of our own conceptions and misconceptions of religious faith.

Three categories – relationship, awareness, and energy

Relationship – the Semitic religions of the ear

Beginning with my own tradition, I think it is possible to say that Christianity and the other Semitic religions are “religions of the ear.” Here God makes himself known by speaking to humanity, and human beings are expected to listen to the word of God, and to respond. By listening and responding to God the human being is involved in a responsible relationship. Germans sometimes emphasize this by three words: Wort (word), Antwort (answer, response), and Verantwortlichkeit (responsibility). In a similar way, hearing God’s word creates obedience. It is expressed in New Testament Greek by the linguistic connection between *akouein* (to hear, listen) and *hypakouein/hypakoé* (to obey, obedience), in German and several other European languages similarly in the connection between Hören (hearing) and Gehorsamkeit (obedience). Responsibility and obedience lead to action, a committed relationship to other people and to the created world. When Jesus was challenged to summarize his teaching, he combined the two basic relationships: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind.... Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:37-39). It is no exaggeration to say that the entire Biblical narration and symbolism is inconceivable without this dynamic relationship between hearing, speaking, and responding in loving action.

A few examples will clarify my point: The Biblical creation story begins with the word of God: “Let there be Light,” and there was light. The entire creation story continues in a similar way. The creator speaks, and it happens. The Koran has corresponding descriptions of the origin of heaven and earth:

When He decreeth a matter,
He saith to it, “Be,”
And it is.
(Sura 2:117)

Let me use two Biblical questions to demonstrate the relational character of Biblical faith as it appears in the powerful symbolism of the first stories of the Bible, a part of the collective mythical memory of most Western people. The first question is not “Who am I? What is my true self?” It is rather the question of relationship expressed in God’s words to Adam when he was hiding from God, “Adam, *where* are you?” That is: Where are you going? Why are you hiding from the source of your life? The second question follows in the story of the first homicide. Cain has killed his brother, Abel, and is confronted with the question: “Cain, *where* is your brother?” To this he answers: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” But every reader knows that his response was false. To be human is to be in a responsible relationship. It is hardly coincidental that in the Biblical narration the broken relationship with God leads to broken relationships between people, even brothers.

The Biblical narration is full of stories about people who were called by God in a very personal way – often called by name – to take responsibility for their own

lives and for the lives of others. Adam and Cain have already been mentioned. God called Abraham to depart from his homeland in order to settle in an unknown country. He called Moses in the desert, saying: "I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt ... and heard their cry..." (Ex 3:7). He encountered Moses on the mountain and gave the people his Law. He came to prophets and leaders, whispered his will into their ears and put his words on their tongues. He came to poets and seers who worshipped him in hymns and prayers. We still use their words, which have increased in potency after centuries of use. From a Christian point of view this divine communication was consummated in the advent of Jesus Christ, who was regarded as the very "word of God" incarnated in human flesh and blood. From an Islamic point of view the divine communication was consummated in the Qur'an, the very word of God.

The most important symbolic figure in these religions is therefore the prophet. A prophet – at least in the Biblical tradition – is not primarily one who looks into a distant future divining what is going to happen, but rather one who claims to have been called by God to proclaim God's will in a concrete situation. The classical prophets begin their oracles with the words, "So says the Lord...", and then reveal what they have heard – usually a proclamation about people's distortion of religion by an intolerable combination of piety and injustice. Their message has a direction towards action in society: things have to change, injustice must be overcome, justice restored. Sometimes God's word is symbolized by a written tablet received by the prophet (Moses), a scroll to be eaten (Ezekiel), or a book to be recited (Mohammad). Jesus consistently said about himself that he spoke what he had heard from his heavenly Father. The mission of Mohammad was to "recite" the words of Allah as he heard them through the angel Gabriel. *Qur'an* literally means "recitation."

Is it necessary to say that this relationship is primarily understood in personal terms? It is a dialogical relationship, expressed in prayer and worship, conflict and friendship, trust, faithfulness, listening and answering. God is primarily described in personal categories, such as lord, king, maker, father, protector, lover, husband, or friend. Even the numerous impersonal symbols used for God, such as cliff, fortress, and fountain have strong personal and emotional overtones – protector, lifegiver, nurturer. The strongest expression for this relationship is an encounter where one can speak to God face to face, "as one man speaks to another," to use an expression from Exodus (33:11).

Few scholars have expressed this relationship more beautifully than Abraham Heschel in his book *Man is not alone*:

God is unwilling to be alone, and man cannot forever remain impervious to what he longs to show. Those of us who cannot keep their striving back find themselves at times within the sight of the unseen and become aglow with its rays. Some of us blush, others wear a mask. Faith is a blush in the presence of God... But faith only comes when we stand face to face – the ineffable in us with the ineffable beyond us – suffer ourselves to be seen, to commune, to receive a ray and to reflect it. But to do that the soul must be alive within the mind (p. 91).

To be human is to be in a relationship. Actually, I do not think this is alien to Asia,

which has a deep understanding of human relationships. One of the most common Japanese expressions for a human person is *ningen* 人間, which consists of two characters. The first simply means a person, or a man. The second character means an open space, an interval, or that which is between. It is symbolized by a sun, or a day 日, placed in the middle of a gate 門. If I may be allowed to press the symbolism, people need time and space in the gate where they meet. To be human is to be with other people in the open space of the gate, listening, asking, speaking and sharing.

I will add an example from my own Lutheran tradition, which is often misunderstood, the concept of faith. When Luther designated “faith,” even “faith alone,” as the central point in his Reformation, it was not faith in terms of belief, doctrine, opinion, but faith as trust, faithfulness, in Latin *fiducia*. The Sino-Japanese pictogram for faith (*shin*) is a beautiful expression of exactly such a relationship. Two characters are combined: the pictogram 人 for “human being, man,” and the pictogram 言 for “word, speaking.” Combined into one pictogram 信 they attain a new meaning: faith, faithfulness, trust, even communication. Earlier the expression “a man and his word” was used in order to express a relationship of total trust. We might prefer to reformulate it as “a person who stands by his or her word.” The pictogram shows an upright person who literally stands by his word and acknowledges what he or she has said. Words create communication and mutuality. They are hardly more than vibrations in the air, which disappear as soon as they have been spoken. But a true relationship will continue to vibrate by virtue of our deepest humanity. Faithfulness is to stand by one’s word.

In sum, the religions of the ear are characterized by listening to God’s word and will, responding in faith by worshipping, loving and serving God on the one hand, and by responsible and loving action towards other people, the society, and the entire creation on the other. The religions of the ear are relational religions, nurtured by faith, trust, dialogue and communication, reconciliation and mutual love. The personal language is not only preferred, but is regarded as the truest expression of our own humanity and of the divine nature.

Awareness – religions of the eye

Anyone who is acquainted with Buddhism would accept that it is primarily a religion of the eye. The aim of the religious search is to wake up and open one’s eye. Shakyamuni Buddha withdrew from the world in order to purify his mind from the desires and passions which darkened and perverted his view. Finally, after six years of strenuous ascetic practices, having completed the trials and temptations the last night of meditation, the day broke and the morning star shone in the east. His eyes were opened. With a purified vision he unmasked the illusions, saw the painful condition of all sentient beings, and envisioned the way towards freedom. From this point of view it is almost inevitable that the eightfold path of Buddhism begins with “right view” or “right insight,” and continues with “right thought.” In addition Buddhism is teeming with expressions related to eye and seeing: awakening, enlightenment, awareness, vision, seeing one’s nature, understanding, wisdom,

illumination, light, and clarity. The contrast is blindness and mental darkness, blind passions, delusion, perverted views, eyes that are shut by dust and mental mud.

The classical statues of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, therefore, emphasize the importance of the eye and the mind. They reveal mild, somewhat withdrawn, faces which look at the world with imperturbable eyes. The eye seeks insight and understanding, and is primarily directed inwards, to the dynamics of the mind. One has to see through the chaotic and destructive forces which corrupt and distort the mental vision, and seek the equanimity and clarity of the middle way.

Buddhism is not indifferent to society, but is more concerned with understanding the world than changing it. Some of the significant stages in that search lead to withdrawal from the world, cutting relationships, liberating oneself from bondage to the bewildering conglomerate that constitutes a person – body, feelings, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness. The ambition is not to change the world, but to be changed, and to see the world in a different way. Even for an awakened one the world is the same, things and phenomena continue as before. But the vision is purified, and hence the attitude to reality is different, just as the world changes when day breaks. The key to the change is in the mind, a new awareness. Only by opening one's mental eyes one is able to be liberated and live without pain.

It is hardly necessary to exemplify this attitude, but let me indicate some implications. On the one hand, the ideal may be a systematic withdrawal from the world, expressed in a world-negating and passive relationship. From the Mahayana point of view, this is the Theravada ideal of the *arhat*, whose practice is characterized by avoidance of all types of contacts that may disturb one's inner harmony and whose goal is nirvana. In spite of the biased description of the *arhat*, it is no exaggeration to say that this has been and still is one aspect of Buddhist spirituality. On the other hand, exactly the emphasis on liberation of the mind may create an entirely different attitude of openness, spontaneity, and affirmation of the things of the world. If the mind is free and pure, one is able to relate with freedom even to the temptations of the world.

Few have expressed this awareness in such a beautiful and precise way as the thirteenth century Japanese Zen master Dōgen:

To learn the Buddha Way is to learn one's own self.
 To learn one's self is to forget one's self.
 To forget one's self is to be confirmed by all *dharmas*.³
 To be confirmed by all *dharmas* is to effect the casting off
 of one's own body and mind and the bodies and minds of others as well.
 All traces of enlightenment disappear,
 and this traceless enlightenment is continued on and on endlessly.
 (Genjōkan, *The Eastern Buddhist*, 5/2, 1972)

Summing up this point, as a religion of the eye Buddhism is primarily concerned with mental awareness, insight, wisdom, understanding, and clarity. Seeing is to be present to things without touching them or manipulating them. Particularly in

3. *Dharmas* in this context means all things, phenomena and happenings.

Buddhism seeing requires an emotional withdrawal, a detachment which is possible only with a radical liberation from all disturbing relationships.

From this point of view the relational language of Semitic religions must seem not only strange, but in conflict with the ideal of mental clarity of true insight. How is it possible for one who emphasizes non-attachment and withdrawal to appreciate the passionate commitment in Semitic religions – with their predilection for personal expressions of faith, their anthropomorphic images of God, and emotional relationships emphasizing obedience, faith, love, and the strong desire for meeting face to face? I raise the question to sharpen our awareness of the distance between us, but I am also convinced that it is possible to speak across the gap between these symbolic and conceptual worlds, and even to discover that the two worlds may be closer than most of us imagine. For now, however, I let my descriptions stand without further comment.

Energy – the modern search for empowerment

I have been searching for concepts that convey my intention in postulating energy as one of three central categories in human religiosity. I discovered that our everyday vocabularies – as well as our religious expressions – tend to be loose, inconsistent, and without precision. Most of the words we use for power, strength, energy, etc., cover a whole range of quite different meanings. In fact it seems difficult to isolate and cultivate power/strength as one separate category, distinct from relationship and insight. At least in the Western context our concepts of power and strength tend to be mixed with all sorts of relationships as well. Power is often “power over” those who are less powerful. God’s omnipotence affirms his lordship. Authority is supported by political or military strength to subdue. I have therefore chosen the term energy in order to emphasize the pure aspect of energy, vitality, strength, inner power, life force, etc., without all the connotations of relationships. I realize my lack of precision, but the point may become clearer as I explain my approach.

My interest in the energy aspect of religion was partly prepared during my years in Japan, but was primarily awakened by the preoccupation with spiritual and psychic energy in modern Western alternative spirituality.

In Japan I came across a number of new religious groups and leaders who devoted themselves to the search for supernatural power, and often experimented with occult techniques in order to attain such powers. They used traditional Japanese expressions about supernatural or divine power, rooted in folk religion, Shinto, Buddhism, and Taoism (*chōnōryoku*, *jintōūriki*, *shinreiryoku*, etc). But some preferred just to speak about *enerugi* (energy), emphasizing the inexhaustible resources of energy available to those who developed such capacities. Some were particularly involved in healing of various types, often combining traditional folk religious practices of shamanistic character with modern therapeutic techniques. Others were more concerned about developing psychic powers, supernatural physical strength, or intellectual capacities. The last decade has been characterized by an excessive interest in the power of *qi* (Jap. *ki*), which has become quite familiar in alternative spirituality

also in the West. The concept is of course a part of traditional Japanese culture inherited from China, almost omnipresent in everyday Japanese language. Until the late 1980s, however, it was not very much in use as a conscious expression of life force or cosmic energy, but then it was somehow vitalized again as part of the multinational spiritual business enterprise called New Age.⁴

The modern – or post-modern – Western preoccupation with energy can be traced from various sources. It is partly a heritage from traditional occult philosophies and practices which in Europe have surfaced in waves of varying intensity, particularly since the time of the Renaissance. It is no exaggeration to suggest that occultism in various forms is one of the most important backgrounds for alternative spirituality in the West in recent decades. According to a classical occult manual, an occultist is “one who intelligently and consciously applies himself to the understanding of the hidden forces in nature and to the laws of the interior world, to the end that he may consciously cooperate with nature and the spiritual intelligences in the production of effects of service to himself and to his fellow-beings ...”⁵ Knowledge is power, and occult knowledge gives access to hidden powers and energies which can be manipulated by the one who understands the hidden correspondences. Even though the occult roots of modern alternative spirituality are often weak, it might be worthwhile noting that it has maintained some of the ambitions of the occult *magus* – to be initiated into the hidden potentials of existence.

Another important factor in alternative spirituality is the fascination with the East. Earlier waves of intellectual and romantic fascination have now been transformed into an existential involvement in and experimentation with Eastern ascetic practices and healing techniques. A few decades ago various types of Hindu gurus and swamis were popular, teaching Yoga and Transcendental Meditation. Zen Buddhism and other types of Buddhist meditation added new insights and methods. And in recent years such Chinese traditions as *taijiquan*, *qigong*, etc. have become popular. Often these were taken out of their religious and spiritual contexts and presented as techniques for obtaining mental and psychological skills.

In addition to Western occultism and Eastern spiritual ways comes a great variety of other traditions: shamanism, witchcraft, and other practices inspired by primal religions and pre-Christian traditions; trends in humanistic psychology; various types of “new natural sciences”; insights from anthropology, etc.

One of the unifying tendencies in this bewildering and often contradictory mixture is the search for strength or energy. One expected the various spiritual traditions to offer methods for developing the potentials of the individual. “Potential” comes from the Latin word *posse* which means “to be able to, to have capacity to,” and hence potential is the hidden capacity or ability or strength to do

4. It is interesting to note that the term *qi/ki* was introduced as one of the options for rendering the term “spirit/Spirit/Holy Spirit” in the Japanese translation of the Bible in the 1880s, since it has some of the connotations the other alternative *rei/ryō* failed to have: breath/breathing, wind, air, human and divine energy.

5. Sepharial, *A Manual of Occultism*, London: Rider and Company 1973, first published 1910.

things. These methods – whether yoga, meditation, taijiquan or other – became “psycho-technologies,” that is practical techniques for investigating the hidden parts of the human psyche and breaking the barriers of everyday consciousness, aiming at developing hidden energies and capacities.

Even a superficial look at the literature of New Age movements, alternative network magazines, advertisements, workshops, music and films demonstrates an overwhelming preoccupation with energy. It is no coincidence that the main Swedish alternative network magazine is called *Energivagen* (The Energy Wave), and the most successful alternative book-club in Norway is called *Energica* (Energetical). Whatever they offer, and whatever they call their methods – healing, therapy, shamanism, yoga, meditation, hyperventilation, holotropic breathing, qigong, rebirthing, dreamwork, self-help, human growth – the energy aspect is obvious. Certain forms of yoga are not presented as ways to religious insight, but as a means for transforming lower instincts to higher energies. East Asian traditions such as *taijiquan*, *qigong*, and *aikidō* promise to open the physical and mental blockages which hinder the free and balanced flow of energy between the individual and the cosmos. Modern Western spirituality – including a great deal of modern Christian charismatic movements – seems to be increasingly concerned with energy. “Empowerment” is the point. People search for new strength, dream about the liberation of the hidden potentials, wait for the frozen wellsprings to flow. Find your inner strength; channel in on the right energies; get in touch with the healing powers; be filled with meaning and life force; tune in to the living energies of the universe.⁶

One important aspect of this understanding of life is the tendency to prefer to speak also of God – if that is a concern at all – in energetic terms. One wants to liberate God from the primitive personal language of traditional religion. God is not a person, but energy. Such personal expressions as lord, king, father, creator, etc. are not only regarded as immature anthropomorphisms, but even as oppressive male language. They must be abandoned and replaced by impersonal and neutral categories, such as light, life, and energy. Expressed in simple technical terminology: the relational god-language, so common in theistic religions, is replaced by an energetic language more in tune with pantheistic religions. God is not An Other to be encountered, but a cosmic source of energy, which is basically identical with the energetic potential in every person.

6. An interesting question is whether the emphasis on energy, power, strength, and potential in modern alternative spirituality could be interpreted as a symptom of certain weaknesses in modern societies: weakening human relationships; the sense of powerlessness, fatigue, and lack of vitality; the feeling of being controlled and manipulated by hidden forces (economic, political, social, and ideological powers) outside the control of the individual.

Separate worlds or complementary categories?

I have tried to describe the conceptual worlds that stem from a concentration on three distinct categories – relationship, awareness, and energy – and the characteristic symbolic languages nurtured by those categories. The initial conclusion seems to be that the three symbolic languages are so different that they represent three worlds that are not only separate, but even incompatible.

As a religion of the eye, Buddhism is primarily concerned with insight and awareness. It does away with all attempts to postulate the existence of any permanent entity, divine or human, spiritual or phenomenal. Being directed to the inner dimension, the outside world is only of secondary interest. The main representative is the Awakened one, *the sage* who has ultimate insight and helps others to open their eyes.

As a religion of the ear, Christianity is primarily a religion of community, of speaking and hearing and answering in responsible word and deed. The highest expression of religious search is love – love of God, and love of the neighbor. Faith in God is expressed in strongly personal language with exceedingly anthropomorphic symbols. The main representative is *the prophet*, the one who speaks with God's voice and calls the community to obedience, reconciliation, and love.

With its emphasis on energy and strength, modern alternative spirituality and many other religious traditions are primarily preoccupied with developing the inner potential of the individual. If God or the divine is taken into consideration at all, it is primarily understood in terms of energy or power, identical with the all-pervading energy of the cosmos and inherent in every human being as well. The main representative is perhaps *the magus*, the seer who has the secret knowledge and power, and who is able to initiate others into this realm.

My attempt to describe these categories as three distinct symbolic worlds needs some modifications. What follows here are only a few suggestions indicating that they may not be incompatible, but perhaps complementary. At least it is easy to see that most of us mix the categories, and that one symbolic category may include the other two as important aspects.

Awareness and energy in relational religions

Those who are acquainted with religions of the ear, with their emphasis on relationship, will probably insist that they also appreciate the function of the eye – seeing, awareness, and wisdom. A great deal of the Biblical tradition is concerned with wisdom, and even the words and acts of Jesus may be heard as words of a wisdom teacher. Wisdom is the primordial principle according to which God created the world. His creative Word is identified with the wisdom, which in the Jewish Bible (the Old Testament) is identified with the Torah (Law), and in the New Testament revealed in the divine *logos* (Prov 8; John 1). In the Beatitudes Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure of heart; for they shall see God” (Matt 5:8). Particularly the Gospel of John is concerned about seeing and understanding.

Knowledge, light, and truth are among its central concepts, "... you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free" (John 8:32). Paul speaks about the "spiritual powers of wisdom and vision, by which there comes the knowledge of him" (Eph 1:17). One passage in the New Testament which exhorts the readers to heed the prophetic word "like a lamp shining in a murky place, until the day breaks and the morning star rises to illuminate your minds" (2 Pet 1:19). It sounds almost like a description of Buddha's awakening.

One could easily multiply such examples. My only reservation is that in many cases these expressions of insight, awareness, and wisdom are also expressions of relationships. Even "seeing God" is in the Biblical tradition not primarily an expression of insight – even though insight is implied – but the highest level of relationship.

The energy or power aspect of relationship is also obvious. Even though God is primarily understood in personal categories, the Bible abounds in expressions about God's power, strength, might, and glory. The meaning of such expressions, however, is not always clear. Sometimes the "energy" aspect is obvious, the emphasis being on "raw" power and strength, God's almighty ability to do whatever he wills, sometimes almost a violent strength. At other times the emphasis is on his authority, his position of glory, his right to receive honor and praise. In Greek the distinction is sometimes made between *dynamis* and *exousia*, the first primarily being an energetic aspect of power and ability, the second being more relational expression of authority. But obviously the two aspects are usually mixed in human affairs, and hence also in divine matters.

One interesting aspect of the power aspect of God is the fact that the Eastern Orthodox Church at an early stage made a distinction between God's transcendent essence (*ousia*) and his "energies" (*energeiai*). His essence could never be grasped by human beings, while his energies could be known through his activities in the world. In The New Testament *energeiai* are usually acts of divine power, such as miracles or other divine interventions.

Another energetic aspect of relationship is experienced in every person's life. Such basic experiences as the love between two persons, or the sense of fellowship are able to mobilize an incredible amount of energy, vitality, and creativity. Trust, friendship, and admiration, likewise, are sources of empowerment. On the contrary, everyone knows how such negative feelings as hatred and envy drain the sources of vitality and strength. Relationships may be defined in many ways, but energy is certainly one important aspect of most relations.

In a similar way the relationship to God may be experienced in energetic terms. God is not only the powerful Other out there, but is the source of strength and vitality. The faithful wait for power and strength from God, or even say that "God is my strength and my song (or power)" (Ex 15:2; Is 12:2).

My point in this connection is merely to indicate that even though Christianity is primarily concerned with the personal aspect of God, Biblical symbolism is open to a more energetic language about God. There is potential for a less personally oriented language.

Relationship and energy in awareness religions

In the same manner it is easy to observe that Buddhism, with all its emphasis on the eye, seeing, insight, and awareness is not without ears, to speak symbolically. Preaching and teaching were a prominent part of Buddha's life. His disciples were "hearers" (*sbravaka*). The common opening of the classical sutras were, "Thus I have heard" It is not arbitrary that the Buddha is usually depicted with extremely long and large ears. Buddhism is not without ears.

As for the relational aspect of Buddhism, there is abundant material for further exploration. Here it suffices to mention the implications of the principle of causality (*pratitya samutpada*), in English often translated as "dependent co-origination" or "interdependence." Depending on the tradition, this principle has been developed into a variety of quite penetrating understandings of total inter-relatedness. It may be developed as a vision of cosmic unity, as a deep sense of solidarity with all suffering life, or as a concern for universal salvation. I have already referred to the Mahayana ideal of the bodhisattva, who is not withdrawn from society in nirvanic harmony, but who vows to abandon nirvana in order to remain in the world of suffering and to lead all sentient beings to ultimate redemption. Insight leads to compassion. Withdrawal from all relationships that keep the mind in bondage leads to a new freedom, and that freedom opens for a new type of relationship.

The energetic aspect of Buddhism is seldom described as a primary goal. Those who are familiar with meditation, however, know how the combination of breathing, quiet concentration and mindfulness may energize body and mind. Another aspect is the liberating power of insight and understanding. Buddhism is generally reluctant to speak about spiritual power or supernatural abilities, but the tradition is unanimous in recognizing supernatural powers as a concomitant aspect of Buddha's awakening, and potentially of any real illumination. Shakyamuni Buddha and several of his disciples had, according to tradition, such supernatural abilities.

Awareness and relationship in energy spiritualities

Is there a similar potential for insight and relationship in spiritual traditions preoccupied with energy? I think so, partly because energy is supposed to be the result of insight into the hidden relationships in the cosmos, but perhaps also in a more paradoxical way.

Even though the preoccupation with power and energy may weaken the concern for awareness and insight, it is fair to say that they are implicit in energy spiritualities. Both the occult *magus* and the modern alternative seeker may be preoccupied with power and experiment with the hidden energies, but the basis for all traditional search for such power is knowledge of the hidden correspondences. Knowledge is power, and without insight, experimenting with the energies may even be dangerous.

The above aspect is implicit in the concern for knowledge of the hidden relations and correspondence. Power, energy, and vitality are based on the ability to

use the correspondences to influence or even manipulate the course of events. This may be done in order to serve “himself” and “his fellow-beings,” to use the above expression from *A Manual of Occultism*; but it may also imply a much more egoistic purpose reducing relationships to serve selfish ends. Hence the relation aspect is obviously present, though generally in a way quite different from those described above under the categories of relationship and awareness spiritualities.

There is, however, a more paradoxical connection between energy and relationship, which might stimulate us to some further reflections on traditional “God language.”

I have observed that some of those who approach alternative spirituality in search of energy and inner strength are in various ways victims of destructive or missing relationships. Some have experienced oppression and violence, and trust neither themselves nor others. Others suffer from a lack of relationships, and struggle with loneliness and isolation. In some cases such experiences are intensified by images of God as an oppressive and controlling divine authority, or as a power who creates emptiness by his absence.⁷ In such cases it is not surprising that they are attracted to a source of strength and energy which is not understood in terms of personal relations. “I will never bow before God,” wrote the Swedish novelist Pär Lagerkvist. He was haunted by oppressive images of God from his childhood, but then he continued, “but by the wellspring I will bow down to drink from it, in order to quench my thirst for that which I cannot fathom, but which I know exists” (*The Death of Abasverus*).

If one’s human dignity is hurt or destroyed by disrupted relationships, it makes sense to search for inner sources of energy rather than relationships. If God is experienced as an oppressive or manipulating or even absent power, it is perhaps more promising to search for an impersonal energy than a personal God. In a paradoxical way, however, it seems as if people really obtain new strength and vitality through such a search, and they may also become able to establish new types of relationships. A person whose dignity is restored and energized will usually be able to face others with new confidence and openness. In the same manner, the attempt to seek the divine as an impersonal source of energy may in the long run open the way for a new appreciation of a personal God, expressed in a relationship of love and trust. New energy tends to restore people to new relationships.

In sum, various religious traditions tend to cultivate one of the three categories we have considered, sometimes without much concern about the others. At the same time, however, they give them room, whether consciously or unconsciously. The categories are not closed systems antagonistic to the others, but rather complementary. As human persons we have a center of identity towards which everything tends to gravitate, but in real life we move from one sphere to the other – home, school, work, business, shopping, entertainment, friendship – with changing aspects of our personality and with a variety of languages. In the same

7. I am not arguing that there are more people with problematic relationships among those involved in alternative spirituality, but I suspect that there may be more awareness of and openness about such problems.

manner it is possible to use a variety of languages and categories in our spiritual life. It is possible to appreciate all three categories – relationship, insight, and energy – without losing our basic commitment.

Enriched by dialogical search

My conclusions are implicit in what I have already said, but let me finally mention two examples of how Christian theology may profit from a dialogical approach.

The first example deals with the Biblical relational and anthropomorphic language about God, which is challenged by both awareness language and energy language. To Western Christians it seems to be an indisputable assumption that God is a person and that God is transcendent. Certainly, our faith would be poor without the personal dimension. It would lose direction without the sense of God as a transcendent Other. A massive Eastern reaction – at least at the intellectual level – shows that the emphasis on God’s personhood and his radical transcendence is one of the main barriers against understanding the Christian faith. One tends to prefer non-personal and immanent language concerning the Absolute, such as the dharma, universal truth, nature, heaven, light and life, suchness, nothingness, and emptiness. Buddhism abounds in divinities and powers, and often uses strongly personal language, but ultimately these are mere symbolic expressions of a reality that belongs to a sphere which transcends the personal.

But there is room for mutual understanding. Christians are aware that anthropomorphic expressions are symbols pointing toward a divine reality that transcends all human categories. Even when we stubbornly cling to the personal expressions, we know that God is not a person out there in the same sense that we are persons.

We tend to regard non-personal categories as vague and diffuse, or even cold and merciless. How could one possibly devote oneself to a universal law of causality? In the East, however, such impersonal language is experienced as a dynamic means of expressing the inexplicable mystery of the absolute. Should we not be inspired by the East to investigate more thoroughly the potential of impersonal god-language?

In a similar way, it should be possible for Christians to speak more boldly about God in immanent categories. Sometimes our emphasis on transcendence reduces God to a power “out there” instead of seeing him as the creator who penetrates the entire cosmos. Eastern thought may not always grasp the *transcendent* presence of the divine, but on the other hand our categories are not always able to express the transcendent *presence* in a meaningful way.

My second example is based on a discussion in a Norwegian alternative network journal. It demonstrates, on the one hand, the emotional gap between relational and energetic languages, but shows, on the other hand, how impossible it is to isolate them from each other. The editor of the journal *Nettverk-nytt* (Network News) describes his own emotional rejection of Christian images of God, which he had

experienced as oppressive and debasing. “The grace of God” was to him a message about a Lord who would punish all who were not willing to debase themselves to begging for pardon. Relational language had lost meaning, and the only alternative was to resort to energy language. But then he asks, “What if it is simply that the grace of God is merely a universal energy – just like love? What if it is simply that the grace of God is merely a universal energy – just like the Christ energy?” He then shares his own experience of what he calls the “Christ energy,” which he had come to know as a universal energy like sunshine, a universal energy nobody can claim as their own. “Rich and poor, orthodox or heretics – we can all go out in the sunshine whenever we want, and receive light, refreshment, and warmth.” In his own childhood he had struggled to be “a good boy” in order to be accepted by a demanding God from whom he expected no favor. His mother, likewise, had been agonized by the fear that she was unworthy and perhaps rejected by God.

Against such a background it is possible to appreciate the need for speaking about God as a fountain of universal energy. What is surprising, however, is the fact that when he really begins to describe what it means to him that God is energy, his explanation becomes permeated with personal and relational language. This energy has “blessed his whole life,” he writes. It is accepting and forgiving; it is a light that follows him; it allows him to be basking in the grace of God; is “just like love.” In fact, it seems as if the “energy” which he has experienced was in need of strongly emotional and relational expressions to be explained .

Allow me to conclude with a Biblical word of wisdom which somehow seems to hold the three categories together in a unified vision: “God’s gift was not a spirit of timidity, but the spirit of power, and love, and thoughtfulness (*sōfrosynē*)” (2 Tim 1:7). With some liberty we might interpret these in terms of energy, relation, and awareness.

