"PROPHET, GURU, SAGE: Three Paradigms of the Hierophant"

David G. Bradley

Duke University, U.S.A.

This paper focuses on the perennial question of why it is that with so many similarities discernable among the world's religions these same traditions remain separate, each claiming to possess unique truth with no signs of a merging into a universal, all embracing faith. Our Congress theme is "Religion and Identity", and it raises for consideration the question of how it is that traditions endure for millenia with singular strength and continuity. This section of the Congress carries the label of Comparative and Phenomenological Studies.

In recent decades the comparative method has been is disrepute for at least two main reasons. The first of these is that the comparative method which was dominant in the study of religions at the turn of the twentieth century led to the propagation of numerous methodological errors which tended to discredit any use of this approach. Both Christian missionaries and secular scholars from Europe and America made the comparison of religions possible by producing excellent translations of Asian scriptures. At the same time they also, all too often, superimposed their own western interpretations on them. The writings of Max Weber, Albert Schweitzer, Rudolf Otto and James Legge typify both the high level of scholarship represented as well as the sorts of errors which can result from searching Asian scriptures with biblical and western questions in mind. For instance, Max Weber sought to find the equivalent of the Hebrew prophet in Indian and Chinese traditions, and failing this pronounced them inferior or lacking in the highest religiosity. Albert Schweitzer, in *Christianity and the Religions of the World*, applied the test of an ethical standard with the Christian ethic as the norm and concluded that Asian religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism did not measure up to Christianity.

The second reason involves the reductionism currently dominant in the social sciences wherein considerations which include belief in supernatural aspects of religion are bracketted out or even ignored as unimportant to understanding a culture or tradition. This is no doubt due, at least in part, to reactions against European colonialism, usually linked with Christian claims to final truth, which have pushed anthropologists and other social scientists towards neutrality on matters of religious belief. One purpose of this paper is to make a modest attempt to reinstate the comparative method as both possible and necessary in the field of History of Religions, including a stress on the importance of religious belief in our discipline.

Today the dominant method in history of religions is phenomenology with its emphasis on the historical, sociological and other such measureable time-space aspects of religion. While Christian missionaries were proclaiming their unique faith, western anthropologists, linguists, mythologists, social theorists and psychologists were hard at work demonstrating that all religious traditions have many things in common and that patterns of religious behaviour are quite similar through the centuries and across the world. Every religious tradition honors sacred places and times, has its

myths, rituals, pilgrimages and festivals. Each also has its human functionaries who preserve and perpetuate the tradition and its ceremonies. These persons variously are called shamans, priests/priestesses, witch doctors, teachers, sages, gurus, prophets, etc. In various ways these sacred persons are concerned with the basic *raison d'être* of every religion, the desire to appropriate supernatural power and meaning for living from the realm of the gods. For this paper I have chosen to delineate and compare three representatives of a type of religious leader found in all traditions. This type is the hierophant who manifests the divine world to his or her disciples by teaching and example, not as a priest in charge of ritual, but rather as a spiritual guide who shows or proclaims the way to salvation for others to follow. These three paradigms are the *prophet* of the biblical religions, sc., Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam; the *guru* of the Indian traditions — Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and the Sikhs; and the *sage* of East Asia as evidenced especially in Taoism and Confucianism.

Now as one who began his scholarly career as a New Testament "form critic", I would like to stress that I have every respect for the contribution of phenomenologists, linguists and all the other anthropological and sociological contributions to the comparative study of religion, and attest that my own work would be impossible without it. But as I have just stated it is my position that this historical, time-space study of religious phenomena all too frequently fails to include the supernatural — the religious dimension — as integral to any truly comparative study. For instance, in preparing this presentation I read a recent excellent monograph, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*,[1] by Professor Robert R Wilson of Yale, and also a competent essay by the Dutch scholar, Jan Gonda titled "The guru".[2] Each of these studies relates its subject — prophet or guru — to the phenomenon of religious leaders found in past and present tribal societies. Wilson shows how the Hebrew prophets fit the pattern of the prophet as found in other ancient near-Eastern, African and other tribal societies. In all these contexts, biblical and non-biblical, the prophet operates either as part of the inner, ruling group or else on the fringe, as protestor and as leader of a dissident group which is striving to replace the central leaders in power. Gonda traces the guru figure from Vedic times through successive stages of development in Indian religious history. He reminds us that the word 'guru' is related to the Latin 'gravis', heavy or important, and states that "the sanskrit term *guru* in itself is an illustration of the widespread belief that mighty, divine, or holy persons are held to be characterized by an uncommon weight."[3] He then proceeds to delineate the attributes, functions and duties of the guru and to adduce pre-historical antecedents and parallels in Persian, Greek and other early cultures.

But neither of these scholars focuses attention on what both the Indian and the biblical community would consider most significant — why it is that the guru or the prophet has special access to supernatural knowledge, or how it is that he is able to transmit divine wisdom and power to the believer and the community. If it seems to be the case that the Christian missionary places too much emphasis on ultimate truth which must be taken on faith, the phenomenologist, at his scholarly peril, ignores or suppresses any vital consideration of the supernatural world as a necessary factor in describing his subject.

I have said "at his scholarly peril" deliberately because it is my conviction that it is not unscientific or unscholarly to concern oneself with the metaphysical and epistemological views of the supernatural world among various religions. It is one thing to find parallels to prophet, guru or sage among various cultures, especially when the linguistic evidence supports one's views about the significance of those parallels. But to relate such an important figure to the faith of the community requires that his function in turn be related to the thematic myths of that tradition.

This assertion requires, on my part, a brief statement of what I intend by such terms as supernatural, the divine dimension, or the infinite and eternal. It amounts to a truism to state that the supernatural is unknowable as well as unprovable. One cannot prove the existence of God, any more than the reality of the doctrine of rebirth. Thus the opening line of the *Tao Teh Ching* states: "The Tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao". The Hindu World-Soul is unknowable, and beyond all proof or measure, so that the proper response to any question or affirmation about the Paramatman is *neti, neti,* not this, not any thing, and so on. The notion of the nature of a supreme being, or any concept of the supernatural must remain a great question mark, or else be merely a profession of unprovable faith. But in studying the myths of the various religious traditions I discern certain affirmations about the supernatural which all religions include, and I find also that because of significant differences in these affirmations it is possible to compare and contrast the role and function of the prophet, guru and sage as hierophants — revealers of the sacred, or supernatural.

The first of these common elements is that the world of the supernatural is a world of power. Though expressed in various ways, and with no discernable unity or agreement on the nature of this power, each tradition does assert this claim. The second point of agreement is that the supernatural dimension contains, or is the source of, timeless wisdom, eternal meaning or truth sufficient to provide solutions for all the problems of mankind. And finally, all religions teach that this power and this meaning can be made available both to the individual and to the entire community of believers offering hope for living.

THREE GREAT SYSTEMS OF BELIEF

It is my contention that there are three main patterns of myths about man and his relation to the supernatural to be discerned among the great religious traditions. Since living religions have their roots in the prehistoric, pre-literate age of mankind many of the obvious similarities to be found probably are due to this common origin along with the high survival value of certain prehistoric patterns of religious life — such as rites of passage, symbolic terminology for the supernatural, and so on. What is surprising is that there are so few major patterns which have survived and became dominant.

In the so-called "fertile crescent" of biblical lands which produced one of the important early human cultures, and where the Semitic language gained prominence, there developed a pattern of myth which became basic to Jewish, Zoroastrian, Christian and Muslim traditions. The myth common to these religions stresses a single deity who is ultimate ruler of all things. This is because he has created our time-space world in which he has placed human beings, commanding them to obey his will in order that their existence might be meaningful and harmonious, and that they be deserving of his saving power. Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam are known as revealed religions because the deity in each case reveals to his creatures what his will for them is — what they are to believe and do in order to merit his guidance and saving power. The tradition itself was shaped, kept strong and passed on to succeeding generations by persons called "prophets". The deity of this myth reveals his will through these chosen spokesmen — Moses, Zoroaster, Jesus, Muhammad, as well as many others — who in turn have proclaimed the will of their god to their fellow believers. In this myth each person is a unique creature who has but one life in which to obey and conform to the deity's will, a belief of crucial importance since one's final destiny is completely in the control of the creator deity, so that, of necessity, one must heed the teachings of the prophets. Where

the Jew, Parsi, Christian and Muslim differ is not about this basic myth of a deity who is creator, judge and savior but about which prophetic tradition is the true one, that of Moses, Zoroaster, Jesus or Muhammad.

In the Indus Valley of Northwest India another great tradition became dominant, even absorbing and redirecting the intrusive tradition of the invading Aryans. Its emphasis is not on creation and obedience but on the fact of rebirth — the *samsaric* fate of each individual who is born again and again into various finite and temporary forms of existence. In Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism, as well as in the tradition of the Sikhs, it is not a creator deity and his revelation which is normative. Instead, in this myth it is taught that each person has generated and shaped his own rebirth cycle out of ignorance, and powered it by *karma* — the results of one's thoughts, words and deeds through many previous existences — leading to one's present life. Here also there is no tradition of prophets who are called by a creator to proclaim the way of obedience to the revealed will of the all powerful deity. Instead help is available from heroic beings who already, by extreme diligence and sacrifice in countless previous lives among gods and among men have achieved a level of wisdom and insight sufficient to guide others in the right path to deliverance from the round of rebirth. Such self perfected beings are called "gurus" or guides, such as Gautama, the Buddha; Mahavira, the Jina; Lord Krishna and Guru Nanak. These and many other gurus in the context of the myth of rebirth teach that the goal of religion is to achieve eventual, final escape (*moksha*) from life's relentless cycle. They also teach others how to gain the supernatural wisdom and power necessary for the attainment of this goal by thoughts and actions which they have found efficacious in their own agelong pilgrimage from life to life. The metaphysical systems as well as the doctrine of the nature of man and his miserable condition differ markedly among these traditions. But they also agree on the all-important need for the disciple to have a guru to teach the cause and cure of entrapment in the rebirth cycle, while stressing as well the necessity for each person to work out his own salvation.

In the religious traditions of China — Taoism and Confucianism — a third mythological pattern prevails on how it is that mankind learns to overcome the barrier which separates the time-space and infinite-eternal dimensions of existence. The barrier between the two modes of existence is neither breached by a god's revelations nor by the many rebirths of intrepid heroes; instead the Chinese "sage" finds himself to be in total harmony with the infinite and eternal in the here and now. Thus the Book of Tao says:

"Without leaving his door
He knows everything under heaven.
Without looking out of his window
He knows all the ways of heaven.
For the further one travels
The less he knows.
Therefore the Sage arrives without going.
Sees all without looking,
Does nothing, yet achieves everything."[4]

The message and effectiveness of the early Chinese classic, *I Ching (Book of Changes)* is predicated on the conviction that all aspects of existence — worldly or heavenly, measureable or infinite — all exist in continuous harmony. The mysterious Tao, or *Way* of the universe, is everywhere and at all times at work affording meaning and power for man's existence, sustaining all things and causing all things to work

in harmony. Chapter XLII of the Tao Teh Ching puts it this way:

"The Tao begot one.
One begot two.
Two begot three.
And three begot the ten thousand things.
The ten thousand things carry yin and embrace yang.
They achieve harmony by combining these forces."

Confucius, for his part, seems to have accepted this basic view of the ideal harmony of the supernatural and natural worlds. He said that he had a mandate from Heaven and that Heaven's truth was in him. It is also reported in his legendary life that three times he wore out the thong on which the bamboo slips were strung forming his copy of *I Ching*, indicating his conformity to the early myth of Tao and yang-yin as the supernatural forces which energize all existence. His teaching of salvation differed from the Taoist, however, in that he stressed the necessity of harmony in the social world which he found exemplified in an idealized feudal past. Thus we find for these two Chinese traditions not a deity breaching the barrier separating the natural world from the supernatural, nor gurus bringing to this world the message of the eternal and infinite gleaned from their own rebirths in the worlds of gods and men, but a quiet, neutral experience in which the sage finds eternity in the midst of time. The two dimensions of existence are intertwined and merged, and the ideal to be sought by all is harmony in the interaction between the ways of heaven and of earth and mankind. This view I have chosen to call "immanentism."

I do not want, however, to ignore or bypass one very important consideration. If prophet, guru and sage serve as hierophants for three different kinds of supernatural worlds the question naturally arises, does this mean that they really are three different divine realms? My answer is that no one knows for sure, nor can one prove whether there even is such a dimension to human existence, and it must always remain a huge question mark. But every tradition has its counterpart of the shaman — prophet, guru, or sage — to whom the followers of a tradition assign special powers and wisdom and to whom the members of the tradition turn for access to such meaning and power for their lives.

Prof. D. Howard Smith says of the Chinese world-view that from early times is found "the belief that the main purpose of religion was to maintain a harmonious relationship between heaven, earth and man."[5] He also states of the Confucian ideal of sagehood (shêng jên) that "the perfect sage not only attained to harmony, serenity, peace and joy in his own inner nature, but functioned as heaven itself functions, so that his 'virtue' outflowed and pervaded the environment in which he lives, and exercised an influence throughout the whole sphere in which he ruled."[6]

When one turns to the Taoist views on sagehood one is struck by the apparently passive views of the nature of the true sage. This is in sharp contrast to the biblical prophet who speaks boldly in the name of his deity, or the Indian guru, such as Siddharta Gautama, who after 10,000 lives announced at his final birth: "The chief am I in all the world."

Thus in chapter XV of the *Tao Teh Ching* we read what is regarded as a description of the sage:

"Of old those that were the best officers of Court
Had inner natures subtle, abstruse, mysterious, penetrating,
Too deep to be understood.
And because such men could not be understood
I can but tell of them as they appeared to the world;

Circumspect they seemed, like one who in winter crosses a stream,
Watchful, as one who must meet danger on every side.
Ceremonious, as one who pays a visit;
Yet yielding, as ice when it begins to melt.
Blank, as a piece of uncarved wood;
Yet receptive as a hollow in the hills.
Murky, as a troubled stream —
Which of you can assume such murkiness, to become in the end still and clear?
Which of you can make yourself inert, to become in the end full of life and stir?
Those who possess this Tao do not try to fill themselves to the brim,
And because they do not try to fill themselves to the brim
They are like a garment that endures all wear and need never be renewed.

In this passage the self-effacing conduct of the sage stresses the ideal of the total harmony of the universe — heaven, earth and mankind wherein it is shameful to call attention to oneself and thereby to break the harmony of life. This shame is, of course, in contrast to the guilt which characterizes biblical religions, or the pollution dominant in the Indian religions which follow the doctrines of rebirth and of karma.

Now one difficulty encountered in using the comparative method is the necessity of developing the background and context for two or more traditions so as to afford a basis for true comparison. To this end I would like to save time by comparing and contrasting two brief stories, one Confucian and one Christian.

In the Lun Yü of Confucius there is a well-known episode recounted in Book XIII, chapter 18:

> "The 'Duke' of She addressed Master K'ung saying, In my country there was a man called Upright Kung. His father appropriated a sheep, and Kung bore witness against him. Master K'ung said, In my country the upright men are of quite another sort. A father will screen his son, and a son his father — which incidentally does involve a sort of uprightness."[7]

This story has been used to offer the Christian an example of the failure of Confucius to measure up to the "high morality" of Jesus who stressed obedience to God and reverence for truthfulness. Yet to the Confucian it is a perfect example of how the virtue of *hsiao*, of filial duty, undergirds the harmony of heaven, earth and mankind.

But when a would-be disciple of Jesus said that he would follow Jesus wherever he led, except that he first had to go and bury his father, Jesus rebuked him quite rudely when he said: "Let the dead bury their dead, but as for you, go and preach the Kingdom of God."[8] This would offend the Confucian as well as the Hindu, for burial of one's father is for them — as it was for the Jew whom Jesus rebuked — a necessary deed which takes first priority. But for Jesus, the prophet, the intended meaning was to stress to the man that nothing — not any excuse whatsoever — could come ahead of total obedience and service to his God, the Creator and Lord of the universe.

Turning back to our three paradigms of the hierophant — prophet, guru and sage — we find that each of them represents the ideal person in their respective traditions. Thus in the biblical religions the perfect Jew, or Christian, or Muslim would be that person who obeys his God, the Creator, completely. For the Jew, Moses is the hierophant who ideally served his God; for the Christian, the dogma of Jesus' sinlessness is due to his perfect obedience, even unto death, to his God — not

because he was known to live a blameless life free of mistakes or bad thoughts; while for the Muslim, Muhammad was the seal of the Prophets because of his total submission to Allah. Among Indian religions the perfect guru is characterized by the naked ascetic who has severed all ties with the world, and is *jivamukti*, or free spirit, or perhaps *Tathagata* as was the Buddha. Such ideal persons are no longer bound by the rules of society, or any other space-time considerations.

As for the sage, the ideal man is described in the fourth appendix of the *I Ching* thus:

> "The Great man is he who is in harmony in his attributes with heaven and earth; in his brightness, with the sun and moon; in his orderly procedure, with the four seasons; and in his relation to the good and bad issues, in harmony with the spiritual agents. He may precede Heaven, and Heaven will not act in opposition to him; he may follow Heaven, but will only act as Heaven at that time would do. If Heaven will not act in opposition to him, how much less will man! how much less will spiritual beings!"[9]

Were there time it might be worthwhile to apply other comparative tests to demonstrate the important distinctions between prophet, guru and sage. Not only can one see perhaps more clearly the origins of guilt, pollution and shame cultures, but such questions as the nature and cause of evil, the ideal of the perfect person in a perfect society, or the meaning of death could be explored in the context of each of these three great traditions. Phenomenology is most necessary to the comparison of religions, but each religion must be view and interpreted in the Context of its own basic myth and tradition.

ENDNOTES

1. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).
2. J. Gonda, *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1965), Chapter VIII.
3. P.237.
4. Waley's translation here and in following quotes.
5. D. Harold Smith, *Chinese Religions* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1968), p.11.
6. P.45.
7. Waley's translation.
8. Luke 11:20 (ASV).
9. I:34, Legge's translation.

Related works by the author of this paper:

1. *Circles of Faith: A Preface to the Study of the World's Religions.* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966.
2. "Is Mysticism a Common Denominator among the World's Religions" (Paper given at IAHR Congress, Winnipeg, 1980).