

A Fractal Interpretation of Religious Diversity

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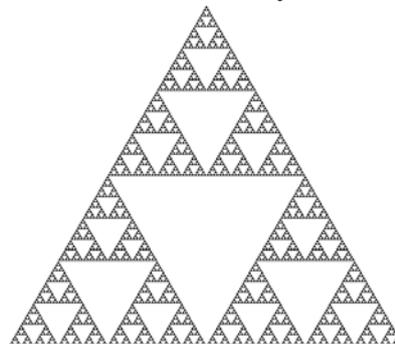
Dear Colleagues, Students, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Tonight I would like to introduce to you a new interpretation of religious diversity. I call it a “fractal interpretation”, because the theory claims that religious diversity displays a fractal structure. Actually, as so many “new” theories, this fractal interpretation is not entirely new. It was, as I will mention in a few moments, anticipated in the phenomenology of religions, in inter-cultural philosophy and even, to some extent, in the religions themselves. As far as my own intellectual development is concerned, I now realize that I went pregnant with this theory for something like three decades – an unusually long pregnancy as I have to admit. It was only in 2015, when I was preparing my Gifford Lectures, that the theory was born. In the middle of the night, round about 3 am or so, labor began. I woke up, went to my desk and sketched on one or two sheets of paper how religious diversity is best understood along the lines of fractal structures.

My following presentation will have four parts. *First*, I will briefly explain the concept and nature of fractals and show how fractal structures are found in inorganic and organic nature. *Second*, I will move on to the realm of culture and religion. After discussing some precursors of a fractal interpretation of religious diversity, I will quote, in my *third* part, some examples of how this theory is already at work in contemporary interreligious theology. In my *fourth* and final part, I will point out briefly what I regard as the advantages and fruitfulness of the theory.

1. Fractals in Inorganic and Organic Nature

The mathematician Benoît Mandelbrot (1924-2010) introduced the term “fractal” in 1975. With “fractals” Mandelbrot referred to certain patterns, structures or forms which display a rough or strict self-similarity across various scales. That is, a component of the pattern or structure constitutes either a strictly identical or at least a similar copy of the whole. Recursiveness and scale invariance are the two key elements of fractals. A well-known example of a fractal shape with strict self-similarity and scale invariance is the so-called Sierpinski triangle. The triangle is composed of three smaller triangles which contain within themselves the same structure and composition of still smaller triangles, and so on.



Mandelbrot proposed that fractal structures with less strict and more irregular forms of self-similarity are found in a number of inorganic and organic natural phenomena.¹ Mandelbrot chose the term “fractal” because it suited particularly well these irregular forms of self-replication as they are often found in nature:

I coined *fractal* from the Latin adjective *fractus*. The corresponding Latin verb *frangere* means ‘to break’: to create irregular fragments. It is therefore sensible – and how appropriate for our needs! – that, in addition to ‘fragmented’ (as in *fraction* or *refraction*), *fractus* should also mean ‘irregular’, both meanings being preserved in *fragment*.²

A prominent example of such non-strict self-similarity or self-similarity in irregularity are coast-lines. If one zooms into a coast-line, getting ever larger magnifications of ever smaller sections, one will notice self-similarity in the sense that one gets similarly fringed lines, with similar shapes like bays, fiords, spits or tongues, etc. Other well-known examples from inorganic nature are certain rock-formations or ice-crystals, each composed of smaller sections with similar though irregular structures. As a final

¹ Mandelbrot 1983, 1.

² Ibid. 4.

example let me mention the structure of waves as it is so masterfully expressed in Hokusai's "The Great Wave".

A well-known organic example is a cauliflower being composed of various smaller florets each of which resembles in its structure the cauliflower



as a whole. A particularly beautiful variant of this is Romanesco, a near relative of



cauliflower. The same fractal structure is also found in many trees or fern leaves.

Given the pervasiveness of fractal phenomena, Mandelbrot emphasized "that the fractal approach is both effective and 'natural.' Not only should it not be resisted, but one ought to wonder how one could have gone so long without it."³ His theory finally culminates in the thesis: "there is a fractal face to the geometry of nature."⁴

It seems that religions have had at times some awareness of the fractal structure of our world. I don't want to go here into too much detail, but just get along with three brief examples.

In Hinduism we find the widespread conviction of a micro-macro-cosmic parallelism. That is, macrocosmic structures are replicated at the microcosmic level and *vice versa*. This idea according to which a fractal structure underlies the whole cosmos has been given a remarkable expression in the so-called Śrī Yantra or Śrī Chakra. The nine intersecting triangles are of a multilayered symbolic meaning. But they circle around the fractal micro-macrocosm scheme, for example representing earth, air and sun as mirrored in body, breath and the inner light of consciousness paralleled with further sets of threes.⁵ The irregular, but nevertheless clearly fractal structure of the Śrī Yantra is evident.

Another, somewhat similar, example is the Buddhist idea of the world as "Indras's" Net" which we find in the Avatamsaka or Kegon Sūtra. "Indra's Net" consists of an infinite number of crystal pearls, all woven into a celestial net, such that the whole net of empty pearls is mirrored or replicated in each single pearl.

³ Ibid. 3.

⁴ Ibid. 3.

⁵ See Kak 2008-9.

My final example is taken from the *Bible moralisée*, a medieval picture bible from the early 13th century. The frontispiece depicts the creation of the world in a way that is somewhat reminiscent of the micro-macro-cosmos scheme. The image is often called “God as the architect of the world”. Yet this is inaccurate. From the cross in the halo it is evident that the depicted “architect” is not God Father but Christ. This is in line with the ancient Christian and Platonic idea that God created the world through the Logos, that is, through the eternal Word or Mind of God which later assumed human form in Jesus. This idea involves three interconnected levels: First, God as the ultimate source of everything, second, the Logos as the Mind or Word of God and third the world as created in and through the Logos. The image from the *Bible moralisée* shows this by giving the same color to Christ’ halo and to the orbit of the world. And it adds another fractal touch to this in that the fringes of the nocturne sky exhibit a fractal pattern of the wave or coast-line type.

Let me now turn away from inorganic and organic nature and move on to the realms of culture and religion, which also show a fractal face.

2. Fractal Structures in Culture and Religion

In 1975, Nakamura Hajime published his monumental intercultural and comparative history of ideas.⁶ Nakamura concluded his voluminous study with the finding that despite the differences between human cultures and traditions in all of them “more or less the same problems arise.”⁷ This, says Nakamura, “means that human nature and human concerns are also vastly similar.”⁸ To a large extent, debates in contemporary inter-cultural philosophy oscillate between the two positions of a radical incommensurability of human cultures on the one hand and their complete commensurability or even essential identity on the other hand, trying to find a satisfactory middle path between these two extremes. As one such middle position, the Indian intercultural philosopher Ram Adhar Mall suggest his concept of intercultural overlapping. Without any overlapping structures, intercultural understanding and

⁶ Nakamura 1992.

⁷ Ibid. 565

⁸ Ibid.

communication would be impossible.⁹ A similar position is taken by the German intercultural philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels. He goes one step further with his concept of intercultural “intersection” (“Verschränkung”), meaning that what is culturally familiar and what is culturally alien “are more or less entangled with each other”. The borderlines between cultures are fuzzy and are more about “accentuation, emphasis and statistic frequency than clear-cut differentiation”.¹⁰ Thus, in speaking of intercultural intersection, Waldenfels seeks to point out that one will find something of one’s own culture in the alien one and something of the alien culture within one’s own.¹¹ This is, *in nuce*, a fractal interpretation of cultural diversity, which Waldenfels finds substantiated by the work of the Swiss intercultural philosopher Elmar Holenstein.¹²

Holenstein, who taught at the Universities of Bochum, Zürich, Tokyo and Hongkong, bases his observation primarily on his comparative studies of Western and Far Eastern cultures. According to Holenstein “it is possible to identify those structures, which are particularly strong in one culture also (at least in rudimentary form) in (nearly all) other cultures.”¹³ One of his examples is the rich variety of different degrees of politeness in the Japanese language. Idioms conveying various forms of politesse exist in all languages, but they are not everywhere as elaborate as in Japanese.¹⁴ Assuming that one particular feature, or cluster of features, is exclusively present in just one culture while totally absent from another one, would be misleading. Cultural differences, say Holenstein, are rather based on the cross-cultural distribution of various features, but with different hierarchies, emphases or different degrees of elaboration.¹⁵ The variations *between* cultures are thus mirrored by the variations that we find *within* cultures or even *within one individual person*:¹⁶

... the same oppositions that are thought to be ascertainable between two cultures (*interculturally*) can often be detected in the same kind and degree

⁹ Mall 2000, 13-24.

¹⁰ Both quotations in Waldenfels 1995, 54.

¹¹ Ibid. 56.

¹² Ibid. 55.

¹³ Holenstein 1985, 133 (my translation).

¹⁴ Holenstein 1985,133.

¹⁵ Ibid. 137ff.

¹⁶ Ibid. 149ff.

within one and the same culture (*intraculturally*), even within one and the same person (*intrasubjectively*) depending on age, surroundings, task or just on mood and humour.¹⁷

In this important thesis, Holenstein distinguishes three different levels of diversity: (1) the ‘intercultural’ level, i.e. the global level of cultural diversity, (2) the ‘intracultural’ level, i.e. the diversity found within each culture, and (3) the ‘intrasubjective’ level, i.e. the diversity found within the mental cosmos of individual persons. What he actually says, is that various patterns of cultural diversity replicate over these three levels or scales. The cultural diversity at the global level is reflected in the diversity within each culture and this again is, to some extent, reflected, on a still smaller scale, in individual persons. Holenstein therefore rejects the idea of a radical difference between cultures in favor of a model of numerous variations of identical or analogous features accompanied by wide-ranging structural similarities. This is, although Holenstein himself does not use that term, a fractal interpretation of cultural diversity.

Taking Holenstein’s distinction of three levels as our springboard, we can now formulate the key idea of a fractal interpretation of *religious* diversity:

- *Inter-religious level:* The diversity among religions
(different types, patterns and typical elements)
- *Intra-religious level:* replicates as the internal diversity
within each of the major religious traditions and
- *Intra-subjective level:* within common but diverse predispositions
of the human mind and psyche.

Let me explain this idea by beginning with a rather simple example. The German phenomenologist of religion, Friedrich Heiler (1892-1967), had classified the different so-called “world religions” into two major types: Prophetic and mystical religions. Some decades later, Julia Ching and Hans Küng expanded this into a threefold typology, distinguishing prophetic, mystical and sapiential, i.e. wisdom religions. The prophetic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, are of Semitic origin; mystical

¹⁷ Holenstein 2003, 46.

religions, that is, Hinduism and Buddhism, are of Indian origin; and sapiential religions, Confucianism and Daoism, are of Chinese origin. Each of the three types of religions is marked by a central religious figure, the prophet, the mystic and the sage. But then, Ching and Küng, add an important clause to their classification. Prophetic religions also contain certain elements and features of mystical and of sapiential religions. Mystical religions contain elements and features of prophetic and sapiential religions. And sapiential religions contain elements of prophetic and mystical religions.¹⁸ Astonishingly, Ching and Küng did not pay much attention to this startling observation. Yet what it shows is that religious diversity, as described by these three types of religions, displays a fractal structure. The diversity of prophetic, mystical and sapiential religions is replicated by the internal diversity within each one of them. The pattern of this fractal structure matches that of the so-called Poincaré chains.

Phenomenologists of religion had come fairly close to the discovery of fractal patterns. Broadly speaking, the phenomenology of religion pursued two different aims: At the interreligious level, they created typologies of different religions, and at the intrareligious level, they developed typologies of the different elements or components within the religions. The overall expectation was to find strong correspondences between specific types of religions and the respective “typical” elements. But this was thwarted by the discovery of countless of parallels in and among the religions at the level of elements and components which did not correspond to the expectation of identifying clear cut differences.

An early phenomenologist who anticipated a fractal understanding of religious diversity was Hilko Wiardo Schomerus (1879-1945). Schomerus distinguished four major types of religions: (1) religions of the *law* (e.g. Judaism), (2) *magical-sacramental* religions (e.g. “Indian mysticism”), (3) *gnostic* religions (e.g. Greek Gnosis and Buddhism), and (4) *devotional* religions (e.g. Hindu *bhakti*-traditions and some forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism).¹⁹ Schomerus derived his typology from a traditional Hindu distinction of four different paths of salvation: The way of works (*karma-marga*), the way of meditation (*yoga-marga*), the way of knowledge (*jñāna*

¹⁸ Küng, Ching 1989, pp. xv-xvi.

¹⁹ Schomerus 1932, 22.

marga) and the way of devotion (*bhakti-marga*). However, according to Schomerus, the actual religions cannot be allocated strictly to these four different types: “There are religious formations which comprise not only one of the said four major types but several or even all four of them, and this in a variegated mixture.”²⁰ The fact that Hinduism includes all four types is thus only one example of a more general situation. Hence the distinction between the four types should be applied to the actual religions not vertically but horizontally, even if in some religions one of the four types may exert a dominant and formative influence. How close Schomerus got to a fractal interpretation is obvious when he states: “Religion as such is hypostasized in a few major types, which persistently recur and unfold everywhere in similar ways, bringing about in all places kindred forms and formations.”²¹

Let me mention one more and very recent example, that is James Ford’s 2016 comparative study of concepts of the ultimate in different religious traditions. After discussing such standard contrapositions as “one versus many”, “personal versus impersonal” or “transcendent versus immanent” in relation to the ultimate, Ford arrives at the following conclusion:

I (...) do not assume that a particular tradition can be characterized by one of the particular poles of these dichotomies. But these dualities do reflect interesting tensions between and within traditions that are worth noting. The heterogenous nature of these traditions suggests a fluidity that should problematize any essentialized or reified characterizations.²²

Today we find a large consensus among religious studies scholars about the mixed, hybrid and syncretistic nature of all the major religious traditions. Much more attention is now paid to the internal diversity of religions than in the early days of the discipline. We now realize that there is no such thing as true and pure Buddhism, true and pure Islam or true and pure Christianity. To quote Peter van der Veer “every religion is syncretistic, since it constantly draws upon heterogeneous elements to the extent that it is often impossible for historians to unravel what comes from where.”²³

²⁰ Ibid. 22 (my translation).

²¹ Ibid. 26 (my translation).

²² Ford 2016, 308.

²³ Veer 1994, 208.

Or as Tinu Ruparell recently said: “Religious hybridity is simply a fact of the history of religions.”²⁴ However, an important insight that comes with the fractal understanding is that the internal diversity and variety of religions is not entirely arbitrary or purely coincidental. The range of *internal* religious diversity rather corresponds to the diversity that we find *among* the religions. To put it succinctly: Religions are neither all the same, nor are they completely different. Religions resemble each other precisely in their internal diversity, although this is differently arranged in each one of them.

So what then about the third level, that is, the intra-subjective level? At this level the fractal configuration can be analyzed both transcendently and psychologically. It was in particular Rudolph Otto (1869-1937) who concluded that the huge number of interreligious parallels should ultimately be explained by the “underlying congruent and common predisposition of humanity in general”,²⁵ which Otto understood as an innate feature of the human mind. Otto assumed a transcendental foundation that accounts for the possibility not merely of religious experience as such but also for its different forms. The assumption that basic patterns of religious diversity are rooted in common features and transcendental structures of the human mind can also be interpreted in terms of religious psychology. An early proponent of this perspective was William James (1842-1910), who suggested a psychological correspondence between the diversity of religions and the diversity of different types of religious personalities as they are found within each religion.²⁶ Yet it is not only different personalities who, at the intra-subjective level, represent different forms of religion. There is also plenty of evidence that one and the same person may instantiate different forms of religion in the course of his or her own life, as has, for example, been shown by James Fowler (1940-2015)²⁷ and other psychologists.

Finally, there is also the possibility that different religious options may co-inhabit the psyche of a single individual person simultaneously. This takes us to the phenomenon

²⁴ Ruparell 2013, 117.

²⁵ “... die zugrundeliegende, einheitliche, gemeinsame Anlage der Menschheit überhaupt“ (Otto 1923, 217); see also *ibid.* 222.

²⁶ James 1990, 436-38.

²⁷ This observation does not require one to accept the evolutionary and hierarchical model that Fowler proposed (see Fowler 1981).

of multi-religious identity and multi-religious belonging. In her profound study of multi-religious belonging, Rose Drew notes that individuals who consciously follow two different religions in fact often oscillate between the two different perspectives, which are not always easily synthesized.²⁸ This observation has been confirmed by another study on dual-belonging, which describes the spiritual attitude of so-called “JuBus”, i.e. Jewish-Buddhists, as a “perpetually ongoing inner dialogue”.²⁹ Drew concludes that in this kind of internalized spiritual dialogue, dual-belongers “become microcosms of the dialogue as a whole...”.³⁰ This connects the smallest level of religious diversity with the largest one and matches with a fractal interpretation. In a sense, it still follows the pattern of the Poincaré chains.

Let me now move on to my third part.

3. Interreligious Theology and the Fractal View of Religious Diversity

By interreligious theology I understand a way of doing theology which is still rooted within one particular religious tradition but is convinced that religiously relevant truth is also found in other traditions. Interreligious theology therefore draws on other religions when reflecting on major questions of human life and will reconsider, and further develop, the answers that have been given in one’s own tradition in a fresh comparative light. It will also reflect on one’s own tradition in order to find out which possible contribution might be made from the wealth of this tradition to the issues on the agenda of a global interreligious theological inquiry.

In more recent years we have seen a steady increase of theological works along the lines of interreligious theology as just described. Several of these works have come across certain phenomena which are best explained in terms of a fractal structure. Let me mention some examples. John Cobb, Mark Heim and Bernhard Nitsche, my colleague from Münster University who is with us here tonight, have each suggested a classification of religious diversity which hinges on the connection between different forms of religious experience and different concepts of ultimate reality.

²⁸ Drew 2011, 209ff.

²⁹ Niculescu 2012, 356.

³⁰ Drew 2011, 226.

Cobb distinguishes three different types of religions: cosmic, acosmic and theistic.³¹ Each of these three types correlates with a specific concept of ultimate reality and a corresponding set of religious experiences. That is, cosmic concepts of ultimate reality recognize a sacred nature of the cosmos itself, as, for example, in Daoism or Native American religions. They correspond to experiences which suggest “a kind of belonging to the cosmos, or kinship with other creatures, about which ordinary experience does not inform us.”³² The Mahāyāna-Buddhist concept of “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) or the Advaita-Vedāntic concept of “Brahman without attributes” (*nirguṇa brahman*) are taken by Cobb as examples of acosmic concepts of the ultimate.³³ They correspond to experiences of an “inward” nature, the “discovery of a ‘depth’ that is free from all the particularities of ordinary experience” or “a removal of all culturally and existentially determined barriers to openness to what is as it is.”³⁴ Theistic concepts, finally, correspond experiences of a personal presence, of communion, of guidance, of being called to a life of righteousness and love and of being released from guilt.³⁵ According to Cobb these different concepts are not related to different experiences of one and the same ultimate reality, but refer to different ultimates or better to ontologically different, but still ultimate features of one complex reality. But I will not discuss Cobb’s metaphysics here.

It a different aspect to which I would like to draw your attention. Cobb developed his classification of cosmic, acosmic and theistic religions under the influence of John A. Hutchison.³⁶ And like Hutchison himself, Cobb makes, more or less in passing, the interesting observation that “more than one of these types can be discerned in most of the great traditions.”³⁷ That is, Cobb uses his typology in both ways: to classify different religious traditions *and* to classify different manifestations within each of the religious traditions. In other words, Cobb applies a fractal interpretation of religious diversity and he interprets major features of this diversity as complementary.

³¹ For a summary of Cobb’s views see Griffin 2005.

³² Cobb 1999, 117.

³³ Griffin 2005, 47.

³⁴ Cobb 1999, 118.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid. 120 (Cobb refers to the second edition of Hutchison’s “Paths of Faiths” of 1975). Hutchison, however, speaks of “cosmic”, “acosmic” and “historical” religion and is influenced in his terminology by Mircea Eliade.

³⁷ Cobb 1999, 121. See Hutchison 1991, 17.

A similar observation applies to Mark Heim. According to Heim, ultimate reality is best characterized by the Trinitarian concept of Christianity. However, he holds that other concepts of the ultimate can be understood as entailing different aspects of the trinity. According to Heim, the Trinity comprises three dimensions: an *impersonal* dimension, a personal or *iconic* dimension and a *communion* dimension. These three dimensions are mirrored in different types of religions and their specific concepts of the ultimate. The *impersonal dimension* of the Trinity consists in the mutual indwelling of the three persons. That is, each person is completely one with the other two persons and therefore totally empty of itself. The latter aspect of this dimension is reflected in Buddhist “not-self” teachings and in concepts like *nirvāṇa* or “emptiness”, while the former aspect of radical mutual indwelling is mirrored in non-dual concepts of the ultimate, most clearly so in Advaita Vedānta. The *personal or iconic dimension* of the Trinity consists in that “the three constitute one will, one purpose, one love toward creation”.³⁸ This dimension is at the center of monotheistic concepts of the ultimate. But it is also present in the perception of a divine law without a divine person as in Daoism or in classical Stoicism: “what is apprehended in these cases is the external unity of the Trinity...”,³⁹ appearing as one divine or heavenly will or law. The third dimension, i.e. the *communion dimension*, underlies the other two dimensions. It combines unity and difference in that the three persons participate and share in each other,⁴⁰ comparable to human relationships of “deep love or intimate friendship”.⁴¹

Like Cobb, Heim makes the interesting observation that “each great religious tradition in some measure recognizes the variety of dimensions we have described...”, and each grasps “the set of dimensions *through* one of them.”⁴² This obviously implies a fractal perspective, because Heim suggests that the differences between various types of religions are also present within each one of them. He even admits that “formally” Christianity is not different from other religions.⁴³ That is, Christianity too apprehends all three dimensions through the lens of one dimension which is taken as dominant, in that case, the dimension of communion.

³⁸ Heim 2003, 394.

³⁹ Ibid., 396.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 397.

⁴¹ Ibid. 391.

⁴² Ibid., 399.

⁴³ Ibid.

Another typology has been suggested by Bernhard Nitsche. Nitsche distinguishes between theistic, monistic and panentheistic types of religions. He correlates the respective concepts of ultimate reality with three principal forms of human relatedness, the relation to the world mediated by one's body, the relation to other human beings, mediated through social contact and the relatedness to oneself, mediated by the self-reflexive structure of our mind. The dominance of world-relatedness produces a *cosmomorphic* form of thought which tends towards monistic concepts of the ultimate. The dominance of social relatedness produces a *sociomorphic* form of thought which generates theistic concepts of the ultimate, and the *noomorphic* form of thought, as it arises from the self-relatedness of our mind, corresponds to panentheistic concepts. Again, I will not discuss here Nitsche's stimulating ideas, but only highlight his admission that these different ways in which humans conceptualize and relate to transcendence, "are thematized in all major and more complex religious systems with different accentuation and in different combinations of what is dominant and subdominant, with different priorities and different interferences."⁴⁴ Once more, we can observe how an attempt at classifying religious diversity leads to a fractal pattern. My final example comes from the Thai Buddhist reformer Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa (1906-1993). According to Buddhadāsa the fundamental means of achieving liberation are not only found in Buddhism but also in Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, though with different emphases and in different forms.⁴⁵ Buddhism puts its emphasis on "wisdom", Christianity on "faith", and Islam on "will-power". But these three central spiritual qualities form an inner unity, so that despite the differences, all three are present in each of the three religions: "each religion comprises all the three ways; the only difference is that a certain religion may give preference to one way or the other."⁴⁶ Doctrinal differences between the religions are explained by Buddhadāsa as a result of their exposure to different cultural influences.⁴⁷ In order to support this view,

⁴⁴ "Diese Grundformen des Transzendenzbezuges werden in allen großen und komplexen Religionssystemen mit unterschiedlichen Akzentsetzungen und Kombinationen von Dominante und Subdominante sowie mit unterschiedlichen Prioritäten und Interferenzen zum Thema." Nitsche (forthcoming).

⁴⁵ Buddhadāsa 1967, 12ff, 24f, 38f.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 13.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 24f.

Buddhadāsa drew not on a Buddhist authority but, interestingly, on the Qur’ān’s affirmation that there is a messenger for each nation (10:47).⁴⁸

As my examples show, the discovery of fractal structures in the diversity of religions does not depend on a particular and specific form of typology. My impression is that whatever scheme we chose in depicting, demarcating and analyzing religious diversity, we will come across fractal patterns. Thus I propose a fractal interpretation of religious diversity almost in a pragmatic sense. It should encourage us, not to view religions as static and homogenous entities, but face their internal diversity and hybridity while looking for analogue forms of diversity and hybridity within one’s own tradition. For this kind of looking at religious diversity is extremely fruitful in relation to the aim of doing theology interreligiously.

4. The Fruitfulness of the Theory

In 1870, Max Mueller, the well-known pioneer of comparative religion, famously stated: ‘Whoever knows one religion knows none.’ About three decades later, the German theologian Adolf von Harnack replied with the words: ‘Whoever knows this religion [Christianity] knows them all.’⁴⁹ While these two statements appear to be, at first sight, irreconcilable, a fractal interpretation of religious diversity shows that both of them are, to some extent, correct. The fractal structures which we can discern in religious diversity are not those of the strict self-similarity as in the Sierpinski triangle. It is rather similar to the irregular forms of self-similarity as in coast lines. Some religions are like large bays, others like fiords and still others like spits. But if we look at them more closely, we find that the coast line of the large bay includes small fiords and spits or we discover that there are small bays and fiords in the coast lines of spits. The irregularity is one in terms of different emphases, different arrangements, and different contexts. And this is what enables the religions to learn from each other. The

⁴⁸ Ibid. 8.

⁴⁹ “When the students of Comparative Philology boldly adapted Goethe’s paradox, ‘He who possesses one language, knows none,’ people were startled at first; but they soon began to feel the truth which was hidden beneath the paradox. ... The same applies to religion. He who knows one, knows none.” (Müller 1882, pp. 21-22). From a lecture which Müller held in 1870. “Wer diese Religion nicht kennt, kennt keine und wer sie samt ihrer Geschichte kennt, kennt alle.” (“Anyone who does not know this religion [i.e. Christianity] knows no religion and anyone who knows [Christianity] including its history knows all [religions].”) Harnack 1904, 168.

other religion is always different but never wholly other. Thus Müller was right in arguing that one needs to learn about many different religions in order to get a better understanding of each one of them. And Harnack was also right in seeing that what is found in other religions is also present, although in different ways, in one's own religion. But he was wrong in assuming that this is only true for Christianity.

The discovery of a correspondence between inter-religious diversity and intra-religious diversity shows that there is far more continuity between ecumenical theology and interreligious theology than people usually assume. This implies, among other things, that one's attitude to the religious other will be interconnected with one's attitude to the denominational other within one's own religious tradition. There is a bond between what one could call the small and the large ecumenism. But the implications of a fractal interpretation of religious diversity go even deeper. It suggests that central doctrinal concepts are not only interrelated with other concepts of their own doctrinal schemes. It also assumes that they are interrelated in the sense of being multifaceted and subject to a variety of interpretations within the various contexts of different sub-traditions or schools. This allows for also seeking and identifying interlinks with some facets of related concepts from other religious traditions. And this explains why interreligious theology carries the promise of "reciprocal illumination".

Through interreligious theology Muslims can discover that and how prophethood also involves the dimensions of incarnation and of awakening. That is, the prophet is someone in whom the Word of God assumes an earthly incarnation in the form of the prophet's divine message. And even more so, a human being can become a prophet – without ceasing to be human – only if the seed of being a prophet is somehow part of the human nature to which a particular human being awakens. The Muslim concept of a prophet-reality or "Muhammad-reality" in every being thus carries strong analogies to the Buddhist understanding of Buddha Nature as has been pointed out by Izutsu Toshihiko (1914-1993) and by Reza Shah-Kazemi who is also with us tonight. Buddhists could become better aware that the way to Buddhahood may also include the quality of a prophetic voice (as in the case of Nichiren) and that the incarnational dimension of Buddha Nature may justly assume theistic forms as it actually often did in the Buddhist tradition. Christians can recognize and appreciate the incarnational

dimension of awakening and rediscover how incarnational thinking is rooted in prophetic revelation. Jesus can thus be seen as the one in whom the divine word assumed not just the form of a message but that of a whole life which became the message. So even central religious categories like that of the Prophet, the Son and the Buddha show a fractal sub-structure: Each contains in itself components of the other two. But it does so in a way which invites processes of mutual learning or reciprocal illumination.

A fractal interpretation of religious diversity contains a number of further advantages which relate to our understanding and use of the concept of “religion” and to the methods in which religions can and should be studied comparatively. But my time has come to an end and therefore I will stop here.⁵⁰

Thank you for listening.

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⁵⁰ The present paper contains some material from Schmidt-Leukel 2017, 222-245.

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