

An Exercise in Inter-religious Conceptualization: Towards Online Creative Conversations

Prof. Pierre Lévy

CRC, FRSC, University of Ottawa, Canada

ABSTRACT

Inter-religious dialogue is expected to increasingly take on the form of *online creative conversations* that rely on digital data and documents. The first part of this paper is about the current *symbolic obstacles* on the road to cultural and religious “intercomprehension” in this context: mainly the incompatibility and the cultural biases of classification systems. To overcome these obstacles (and some others), I propose using IEML (*Information Economy MetaLanguage*), a computable language specially suited to the online intercultural dialogue that I developed at the Canada Research Chair in collective intelligence at the University of Ottawa. The second and main part of this paper presents some examples of the application of basic IEML categories to the religious domain.

KEY WORDS

IEML, religion, semantics, classification, social computing, collective intelligence, conversation, information sciences

CLASSIFICATION SYSTEMS’ CULTURAL BIAS AND INCOMPATIBILITY

Let us begin by examining the many different, incompatible and culturally biased classification systems in use today. We need to draw a distinction between data and metadata. Data refers to archived documents in digital as well as non-digital formats (texts, images, sounds, programs, journals, books, records, films), while metadata refers to the annotations added to documents in order to organize, retrieve and filter them (abstracts, key words, topics, assessments, etc.). First of all, concerning data, we do not always have at our disposal machine translation systems that are general and reliable enough for us to be able to switch between the many natural languages in existence. As for metadata, we have to contend with multiple ordering systems as well as the many different languages in existence. Librarians and archivists in the 19th and 20th centuries developed a range of indexing and cataloguing systems. We will refer to Dewey’s hierarchical decimal system below. Ranganathan’s multi-faceted classification system or Otlet’s early attempts at hypertextual classification could also be cited. At the time of their conception, all these systems were essentially intended to manage collections of material documents stored in buildings. Whereas the collections housed in individual libraries and resource institutions remained separated by significant geographic (and cultural) distances, the various classification systems in existence did not pose too many practical problems. However, now that geographically dispersed records are converging into the online world, the failure to harmonize these systems is becoming painfully clear.

Irrespective of the various documentation languages used by the administrators of major collections, each culture and each intellectual tradition and discipline—even each theory—proposes its own terminology and way of classifying concepts. As such, the way “subjects” or concepts—or language itself, for that matter—are organized constitutes an essential dimension of thought. Therefore, we cannot simply impose a particular uniform classification system in order to facilitate online research, let alone impose English as

the one and only language medium. This is why we should assume that the only possible solution lies in a metalanguage capable of encoding the diversity of languages, or if you will, a system of universal semantic coordinates equipped to handle as many different classifications as necessary. By way of illustrating the inherent cultural bias of the classification systems passed down to us from the 19th and 20th centuries, let us see how Dewey's system (the most widely used in the world) classifies the subject of "religion."

Below are the ten subdivisions of Main Class 200 (Religion) in Dewey's decimal classification:

- 200 Religion
- 210 Natural theology
- 220 Bible
- 230 Christian theology
- 240 Christian moral & devotional theology
- 250 Christian orders & local church
- 260 Christian social theology
- 270 Christian church history
- 280 Christian denominations & sects
- 290 Other & comparative religions.

The outdated ethnocentric character of Dewey's classification system is further confirmed in the subsections of Subdivision 290 (Other religions):

- 291 Comparative religion
- 292 Classical (Greek & Roman) religion
- 293 Germanic religion
- 294 Religions of Indic origin
- 295 Zoroastrianism (Mazdaism, Parseeism)
- 296 Judaism
- 297 Islam & religions originating in it
- 298 Mormonism
- 299 Other religions

It may be noted, for example, that Buddhism is not even directly mentioned, and the Baha'i faith—which should have have the utmost respect for but whose only seven million followers are persecuted in several Muslim countries (because it is not one of the religions listed by the Qur'an as a "religion of the book")—is grouped together with and in the same order as Islam with its more than one and a half billion followers. This classification system's same lack of equanimity and outdated ethnocentric myopia is evident in other fields of knowledge as well.

Other classification systems (including the Library of Congress Headings—contingent upon the specific situation in the United States of course) are only marginally less biased than Dewey's system. This is why rather than a classification system or super-ontology, I propose a formal language for use in online creative conversations that would make it possible to express any concept or classification.

Rethinking Archives

Memory software devices are closely dependent on their material and technological support mechanisms. The indexing processes and documentary metalanguages developed and perfected during the 19th and 20th centuries were conceived to search for printed documents and material media within specific physical institutions or, in some cases, within national institutional networks. The many different classification and indexing systems in operation across the planet did not cause too many problems, as each library or

resource centre was of course organized according to its own unique system. However, since the beginning of the 21st century, practically all libraries, museums and archives have been digitizing and making their catalogues and collections available online. As a result, human memory now tends to congregate around a single technological medium. That being the case, national and institutional disparities are no longer tenable when indexing, classifying or elaborating documentary metalanguages. This is one of the reasons why ever since the launch of the World Wide Web in 1993 library and documentation sciences have encountered major new challenges. Memory size has so vastly expanded that a truly multilingual universal media is beginning to take shape. Documents and their connections with one another are becoming more fluid and are constantly undergoing change. Users' questions and practices are evolving along with the expanding interconnectedness and easier access to the system. If we were to view the current state of affairs through the eyes of future generations, it is evident that the norms and metalanguages have not yet caught up with the new realities, and therefore the potential for automated calculations and interactivity remains largely underexploited.

In order to integrate the lifting of age-old constraints—writing first appeared 5000 years ago—associated with the physical storage of documents, we need to reconsider how to conceive of and organize archives. Prior to the Internet age, it was necessary to consider all documentation systems and indexation metalanguages when looking to find eminently practical ways to access physical documents. The need to place supporting information elements “somewhere” seemed so natural that its constraining effects were barely noticed. As pointed out by David Weinberger, the three-dimensional model of spatial organization did not only apply to books, records and cassettes, but to libraries' index files and catalogues as well. Since the appearance of the Internet—still a very recent phenomenon in our cultural evolution—we have witnessed a digital information explosion. Any bit of information can be inexpensively disseminated into every last nodule of the Web. The unlimited possibilities for creating documents as well as the ability to neatly pinpoint them with hyperlinks in the now all-pervasive digital environments—i.e. they are virtually present everywhere—means that archival materials no longer have to be addressed within a primarily physical space, but rather in an intangible semantic sphere: the addressing of archival materials today depends more on what they mean to readers and how they are relevant to them. This means that basic addressing is shifting from a physical dimension (the indexing system in a library) to a semantic order. And one mutation leads to another: there are now endless possibilities for semantically addressing a document in accordance with its different aspects and uses.

As any participatory Web user-contributor is aware, there are now thousands of different possible ways to organize and index the same set of documents. The classification of documents based on established methods is no longer the exclusive domain of documentation and information science specialists. Billions of users can now tag documents as they see fit. Indexing—until recently the exclusive domain of dedicated experts—can now be performed by just about anyone on a grand scale on Amazon, Librarything or YouTube, on social bookmarking websites, blogs, Twitter, and—thanks to Faviki—even on Wikipedia. The result of this collective classification activity is known as *folksonomy* (modelled after the word “taxonomy”). Folksonomy tags are of course inconsistent due to the synonymy (several key words are used to describe the same concept) and homonymy (some key words have more than one meaning) phenomena, not to mention the interferences caused by faulty spelling, plurals, abbreviations, etc. Furthermore, these tags can differ greatly in terms of their degree of generality, or they may be difficult to class into categories or subcategories. And finally, the world's many natural languages (in which tags are generally expressed) are still seriously fragmenting the creative conversations embarked on over the past few years with the aim to organize our global memory. However imperfect folksonomies in 2010 may still be, they are a sign of the creative conversations—including inter-religious dialogue— still to come, which will be capable of connecting different perspectives to a universal memory that will be better able to reflect the diversity inherent in human communities and their diverse areas of interest.

An Attempt to Conceptualize Religious Phenomena Using Basic IEML (Information Economy Meta Language) Categories

In an attempt to bridge the gap described above, I devised a categorization language (see Lévy 2011) based on two fundamental semantic dialectics: the Virtual / Actual and the Sign / Being / Thing. In IEML, these dialectics are recursively combined at several complexity levels; nevertheless, I will limit my discussion to the first and simplest level.

Virtual / Actual Bipolarity

The Virtual / Actual (U / A) distinction reveals a very general opposition—and complementarity—between abstract indetermination, on the one hand, and concrete delimitation, on the other. According to the classical Aristotelian distinction, the Virtual corresponds to “potentiality” and the Actual to “actuality.” The “Western” Actual Pole indicates that which can be touched or has a perceptible determination, whereas the “Eastern” Virtual Pole denotes that which is potential or intangible. As such, it is easy to understand that in Figure 1 the Earth (concrete, tangible) is assigned to the Actual Pole and the Sky (intangible and distant) to the Virtual Pole. Likewise in traditional Chinese I-Ching philosophy, the Sky trigram is composed of three yang traits, whereas the Earth trigram is composed of three yin traits. We also know that yang is primarily associated with the masculine principle, whereas yin denotes a feminine principle. It may be noted that the word “virtual” derives from the Latin *vir*, denoting a human being of the male gender. Many traditional representations view the male as the bearer of seeds (i.e. associated with the virtual) and the female as the actualization or realization agent for the plant or animal that is virtually contained in the seed. In accordance with this traditional representation, IEML represents the male gender as U and the female gender as A. The dual alignment of Virtual / Heaven / Male on the one hand and Actual / Earth / Female on the other follows convention, of course. Whereas ancient cultures generally associated the sky with a male deity (Uranus in Greek mythology, for example) and the Earth with a female deity (Gaia in Greek mythology, for example), there are notable exceptions to this rule. In the era of the Egyptian pharaohs, for example, the Heavens were personified by the goddess Nut and the Earth by the god Geb. From a theological perspective, Transcendence occurs “in heaven,” is invisible, inaccessible, inexpressible, absent or still, whereas the Divine in the “earthly” world is expressed through Immanence. If this spatial dichotomy is transposed to a temporal one, we arrive at the distinction between eternity—associated with the Virtual—and time or era—associated with the Actual.

VIRTUAL (U) / ACTUAL (A) DIALECTIC

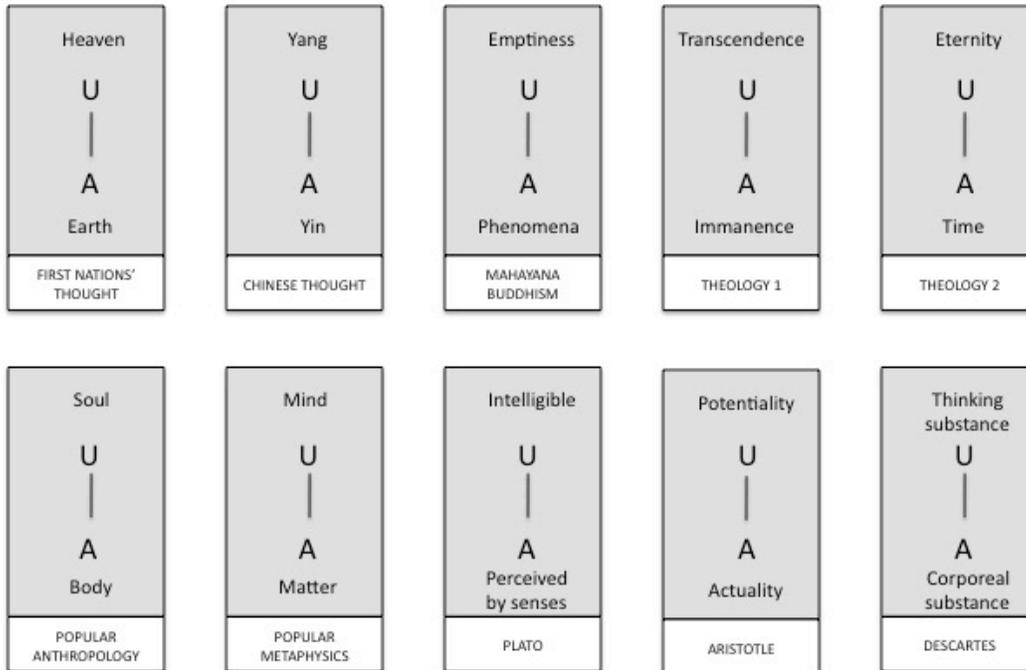


Figure 1. [The Virtual / Actual dialectic]

According to Mahayana philosophy, emptiness does not signify a void, nothingness or nil, but rather (1) the open potentialities of the spirit and (2) the absence of a fixed ontological substance in forms or phenomena, which are impermanent and dependent on causes and conditions. As such, there is a dialectic between apparently “solid” phenomena existing on their own (relative truth), on the one hand, and their empty nature, on the other, meaning they arise from cognitive processes that are impermanent and subject to interdependence (absolute truth).

The distinction between spirit and matter or between soul and body is found in many popular conceptions as well as in scholarly philosophies, which seems to suggest these distinctions have a universal quality. On the other hand, the precise nature or definition of these two poles is clearly subject to many variations, and some cultures maintain subtle distinctions between several kinds of bodies and different types of souls. For example, we may note that the Platonic opposition between the sensible and the intelligible realms is one of the fundamental tenets of the Greek philosophical tradition—an oppositional concept that has survived in various guises throughout history. The two Cartesian substances—thinking substance and corporeal substance—are among the most current manifestations of this dichotomy, also found in other guises in many other philosophies. For example, whereas Spinoza recognizes just a single substance, his treatise *Ethics* recognizes that substance knowable to humans has two attributes: the corporeal and thought.

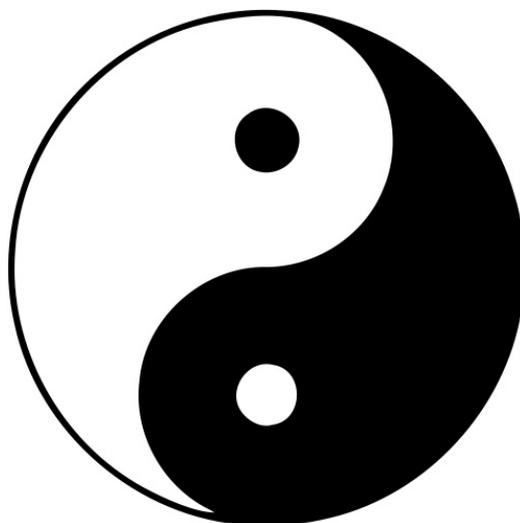


Figure 2 [The Yin / Yang dialectic]

Virtual / Actual Dialectic in the Religious Domain

Not only do these two terms serve to define one another by virtue of their mutual opposition, but they also engage with and transform into one another. The well-known image of the two fish-like shapes, yin and yang (see Figure 2), aptly illustrates this point. Each of the two terms contains the germ of the other or is present in the hollow of the other. The Virtual / Actual dialectic has a generative quality. Deities are born of the union between Sky and Earth, and humans are born of the union between man and woman.

Epistemologically speaking, we can sketch the generative loop of the transcendental and the empirical—a special case of the Virtual / Actual dialectic—which is fundamental to the development of human knowledge. This generative loop is illustrated within the very general “sacred” domain. This example is relevant for two reasons: first, because from a genetic perspective religions—as one of my teachers, Michel Serres, would often point out—form the basis of the humanities and social sciences, both in terms of their theoretical or contemplative dimensions as well as their norm-engendering aspects. The earliest ideas of the forms, meanings and purposes of human existence can be found in traditional cultures’ founding myths and narratives, which—after several centuries of reflection—were developed by scribes, scholars, Brahmins, priests and clerics responsible for temples, sacrifices, rituals, prayers, mysteries, initiations, funeral rites, oracles, divination procedures, and holy scriptures or classic texts. From the earliest civilizations in possession of a writing system and onward to the contemporary age, schools often emerged in the shadows of temples, places of worship and monasteries (including the famous Mouseion of Alexandria). Sacred knowledge provided a framework for elaborating the first systematic methods for interpreting signs and texts and thereby gave birth to hermeneutics.

The second reason is that while religion, understandably, is often considered to be a divisive force that keeps different groups of humans separate, when broadened to include the meaning of sacred and spirituality in general, religion may also be studied and understood as a phenomenon capable of bringing humanity closer together. One of religion’s basic driving forces derives from the co-dependent generative relationship between the Virtual Pole (Heavens, Transcendence, Emptiness, Eternity...) and the Actual Pole (Earth, Immanence, Phenomena, Time...). Even if specific solutions may differ, almost everywhere we look, we are faced with the problem of how best to foster circulation and mediation between the two poles. To encourage the flow from Actual to Virtual, we need to release sacrificial smoke, perform rituals for maintaining or restoring cosmic processes, erect temples and say prayers, and the soul will convert toward the divine. To encourage the flow from Virtual to Actual, the answers to our material and spiritual sacrifices will have to descend from Heaven in the guise of the creation, revelations, blessings and pardons. The souls that managed to ascend to higher ground on the wings of faith, prayer, meditation,

rituals, or through the study of the tradition, produce a constant flow of deeds of compassion, charity, humanity and justice... A sacred breath joins Heaven and Earth together: angels ascending and descending Jacob's ladder, grace, barakah, berakhah, Pegasus or Wind Horse...

General Meaning of the Sign-Being-Thing Tripolarity

This tripolarity mirrors the structure inherent in symbolic representation: signifier, signified, and referent. S denotes Sign, B denotes Being and T denotes Thing.

GENERAL DIALECTIC SIGN (S) / BEING (B) / THING (T)

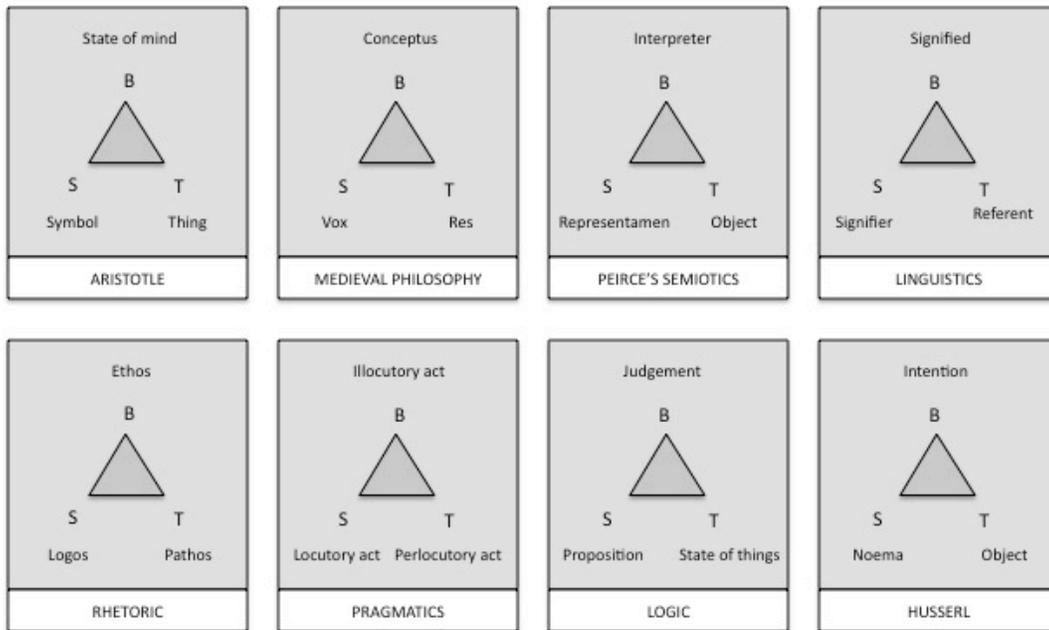


Figure 3 [The general ternary semiotic dialectic]

The first semiotic Pole S, corresponding to Sign, may be called the signifier, and may for example be the sound or visual representation of the noun “tree” (see Figure 3). The second semiotic Pole B, corresponding to Being, is that which is signified to an interpretant, for example the general notion of “tree.” A (generally) human mind is required in order to interpret a linguistic signifier. There cannot be a “notion” or general category independent of a living cognitive system capable of manipulating symbols and understanding their meanings. For example, the signifiers in the English language signify nothing to ants and even less to the sun. Even though we do not have direct access to what is being signified without it being represented by a signifier, the signified does exist in the mind. Something signified is obviously of an abstract nature, a concept distinct from the signifier that represents it. For instance, we can state that the French signifier “*arbre*” has the same meaning (or signifies the same) as the English “tree.” There can of course be two (or more) signifiers for representing the same signified element, as signifiers and what they signify are different entities. The third semiotic Pole T, corresponding to Thing, is the referent, meaning the object or objects to which the signifier refers by way of the signified: real trees in general, or else this oak, this maple or this palm tree—which can be climbed up or cut down. Certain variants of the semiotic

process use only two terms: signifier and referent or signifier and signified. By way of contrast, a ternary semiotics includes that which is signified to an interpretant (the meaning according to Frege) and the referent (which ultimately amounts to an objective context and data). This basic decision has profound philosophical implications. There are reference-based semantic theories that only consider signifiers and referents, thereby explaining the capacity of symbols for representing something without passing through an interpretation stage. By including the interpretant, we clearly assert that the mind needs to account fully for the process of signification. This also reaffirms the crucial importance of the hermeneutic activity. This decision opens the door to freedom—and therefore divergence—of interpretation. Saussure’s duality of symbols—including only the signifier and the signified—works well for dictionary entries and at the general level of “*language*”. However, the signifier/signified duality is insufficient for concrete and real statements, or put differently, at the level of “*speech*”. Statements made in context do not only have a conceptual meaning but also an effective reference. By including a Referent Pole, we are also giving due consideration to the performative effects of context, effectively acknowledging the existence of objects beyond the fields of logic and linguistics. As such, IEML continues the ternary semiotic tradition first begun by Aristotle and later developed by medieval philosophers (*vox*, *conceptus*, *res*) from a variety of linguistic and religious backgrounds, and then carried on by Classical Age philosophers and grammarians, and finally refined by C. S. Peirce and contemporary linguists.

Ternary Dialectics in the Religious Domain

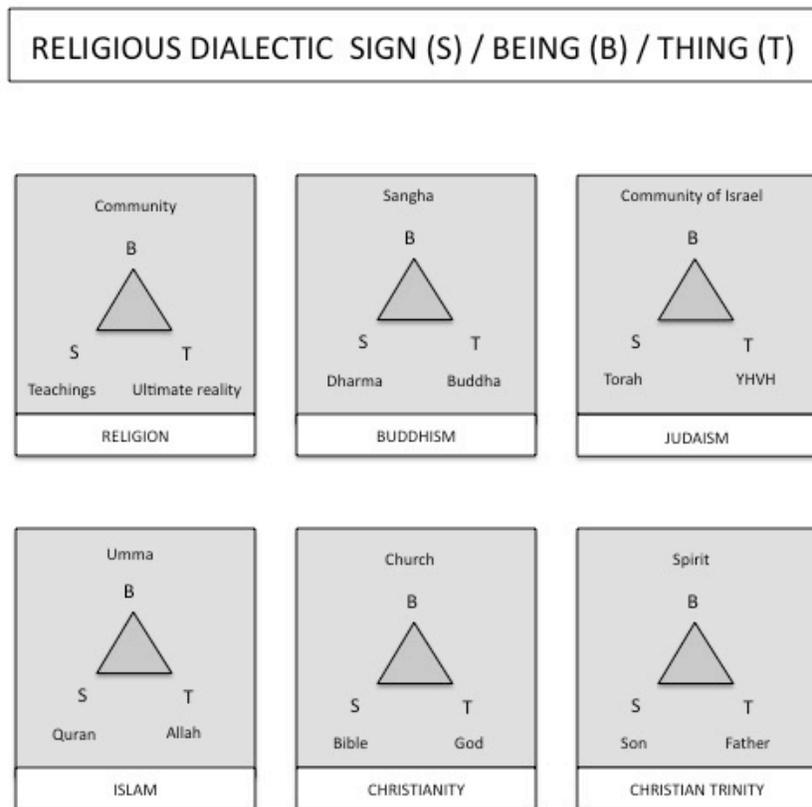


Figure 4 [Ternary dialectic in the religious domain]

In the religious domain (see Figure 4), especially in the case of religions that make a claim for universality and are founded on alphabetic texts, we encounter examples of the S / B / T ternary dialectic pretty much everywhere, in the general guise of Teachings S, Community B, and Ultimate Truth T. We can consider the Teachings to be the Holy Scriptures as well as the doctrine they contain—and the doctrine may be reinforced, extended or interpreted through a tradition of commentary. The Community obviously includes the followers of the religion, for whom the Teachings are intended and who recognize their validity, put them into Practice and pass them on. And finally, we refer to Ultimate Truth rather than Divinity so that nontheistic religions, such as Buddhism, can be included as well. An Ultimate Truth is usually the direct or indirect source of the Teachings, the purpose of the faith and the force that draws and holds together the Community. The quality of the text or speech contained in the Teachings assigns them to Pole Sign S. The Community's human characteristics—their mental as well as social dimensions—assigns it to Pole Being B. And finally, since the Divine (or the Nature of Buddha) serves as reference, source and ultimate truth, it is assigned to Pole Thing B. I cannot emphasize enough that the Divine (or the Nature of Buddha) is not “a thing” in the same sense conveyed by the word “thing” in natural languages. It is a position in an abstract semantic structure rather than an arbitrary and violent reduction of the Divine to little more than “a thing.” In the context of the discussion on ternarity, the case of Christianity—the largest religion in the world in 2010—is of particular interest, as not only does the Divine occupy one of the three poles but it is also the (recursive) seat of a constituent ternarity, namely the Trinity. We can assign the Son to Sign S, since he is the incarnation of logos (without wanting to enter into a Christological debate, it is clear that “the Son”, by virtue of his incarnation, passion and resurrection, also plays a central role as a mediator in the Virtual / Actual dialectic). The Spirit is assigned to Being B in accordance with its guiding role in the Father-Son relationship and its function to unify the Community, the members of which speak many different languages (see the story of Pentecost). In line with this choice, the Mind is generally assigned to Pole B in Figure 5. Finally, the Father holds the position of the ultimate reference T. I am following in St. Augustine's footsteps here, who in his famous treatise *De Trinitate* (2000, p. 249-728) explicitly connects the mystery of the Trinity to cognitive and semiotic reflections. According to him, the human soul—and its manner of knowing—contains a finished, imperfect image of the Holy Trinity. In an effort to be an astute semantic engineer, we, for our part, will not venture any hypotheses on what constitutes original structure and what the image. The goal here is to emphasize the isomorphisms at stake instead and construct semantic bridges between theology, semiotics, epistemology, and anthropology, etc.

Hexagonal Dialectic of Religion

At the level 0 in IEML we also find a “hexagonal” dialectic with six poles combining the Virtual / Actual and the Sign / Being / Thing dialectics: US / UB / UT / AS / AB / AT. The hexagonal dialectic of IEML can serve as an analysis framework in religious studies. The challenge is how to devise a general model for organizing and comparing information to account for the complexity of institutionalized spiritual life without imposing foreign concepts on specific traditions or excluding the expression of historical peculiarities. When referring to Figure 5, it is important to keep in mind that the illustration at the top left shows the dialectic between the union of the three (virtual) characteristics of the hexagon's upper section and the union of the three (actual) characteristics at its lower section. Furthermore, the illustration at the top right shows the tripolar dialectic between the union of the two “Sign” characteristics on the left, the union of the two “Being” characteristics in the centre and the union of the two “Thing” characteristics on the right. As shown in Figure 5, the Virtual / Actual dialectic effectively becomes the dialectic of Immanence and Transcendence. It could be argued here that the notion of Transcendence—even though it certainly finds application in many spiritual traditions, particularly in those that have developed written theological and philosophical doctrines—is poorly suited to describe primitive religions or any other traditions with different conceptions of divine Transcendence than those held in monotheistic religions, for example. However, we can understand Transcendence to have a more general meaning here. Transcendence in Figure 5 does not only include its “strong” meaning, as understood by scholarly theologians, but also its “weak” meaning, which is quite simply everything that extends beyond the

horizon of everyday life. If we simultaneously apply the strong and weak meanings to the word “transcendence,” the concept denoted can become relevant to all traditions. It is the invisible, the supernatural—in fact, everything that goes beyond ordinary human reality. As mentioned above, the dialectical exchanges between Transcendence and Immanence constitute one of the primary driving forces of spiritual life.

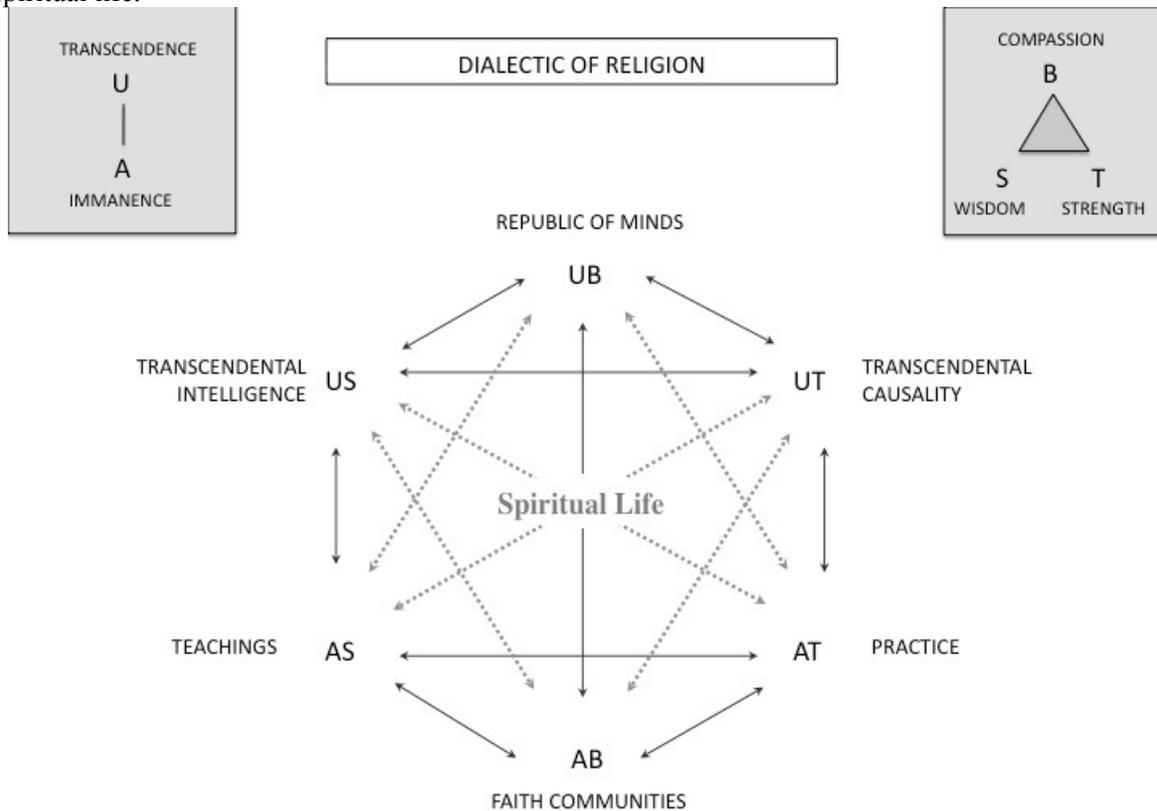


Figure 5 [Dialectic of Religion]

Dialectic of Immanence AS / AB / AT

The “visible” dimension of religion—its Immanence—can be analyzed according to a three-pole framework. At the Sign Pole, we find the traditional Teachings AS; at the Being Pole, we have the Community of Believers AB; and at the Thing Pole—amounting to spiritual exercises and deeds—we have Practice AT. The three Immanence poles are interdependent in that the Community is often composed of the authors and the beneficiaries of religious Practices, as well as the Teachings’ receivers, interpreters and conveyors. Conversely, Practice is clearly encouraged and guided by the Teachings, while their comprehension and dissemination in and of themselves constitute Practice. The Immanence of spiritual life progresses through sequential time (or worldly time) and space—the same dimensions inhabited by mortal humans. This constitutes the objective—or observable—religious domain.

Dialectic of Transcendence US / UB / UT

Concerning Transcendence, we have the “invisible” dimension of religion, which includes the soul’s secret inner life, the supernatural, infinity, everything extra-sensory and death. By definition, everything associated with the transcendental domain is non actual. Inner life, eternity and Transcendence are not observable by our senses and may only be attained by way of the symbolization processes inherent in Religious Practice, through meditation on the Teachings as well as the reciting of sense-engendering

myths. Except in the guise of symbolism, the invisible does not feature in the time-space continuum. As in the case of Immanence—with which it has a dialectical relationship—Transcendence may be structured into three complementary poles. At the Sign Pole we have Transcendental Intelligence US—the divine or ultimate wisdom that inspires the Teachings in the guise of the symbolic forms and representations assumed by this supreme knowledge in the traditions studied. At the Being Pole, we have the Republic of Minds UB, a term borrowed and creatively adapted from Leibniz (Leibniz, *Discours de métaphysique* XXXVI), who would not have embraced the broad meaning applied to the term here. The Republic of Minds refers to a Heavenly Community—as opposed to the Earthly Community—composed of a deity or deities, angels, spirits, immortal souls, and metaphysical or supernatural beings generally. And finally, we have Transcendental Causality located at the Thing Pole UT, representing how Transcendence acts, particularly in terms of its creative power, divine justice, ultimate cosmic order, law of karma, spiritual tropismⁱ, emanation from the One, or heavenly actions generally. Transcendental Causality enters into a “dialogue” that engages with a given religion’s followers’ Practices. The three virtual poles of religion—Transcendental Intelligence, Republic of Minds and Transcendental Causality—perform a dialectical interaction. At the threshold to eternity, the transcendental moment of the spiritual life rises up like a supernatural or “imaginal”ⁱⁱ counterpart. The “imaginal” connotes the symbolic image of transcendental realities—whereas the imaginary is pitted against the real—in contrast to the immanent spirituality, which is bound to life on Earth and the passage of time.

Let us now elaborate the meaning of the Virtual / Actual dialectic for each of the three poles—Sign, Being, Thing—associated with the hexagonal dialectic of religion.

Dialectic of Wisdom US / AS

The Actual Teachings AS include sacred knowledge, written and oral revelations, religious laws, canonical traditions, interpretations, customs and all kinds of stories. These teachings are not necessarily rigid. Since the transmission processes within the Immanent Community experience changing cultural realities over time, they, too, are subject to evolution and renewal. The Transcendental Intelligence US that the Teachings interpret, symbolize and reflect can appear in the guise of many names: omniscience, infinite divine intelligence, Sophia, Logos, Dharma... Do certain esoteric traditions not lay claim to the existence of an eternal Torah or Qur’an predating the creation of the world? And so what is the relationship between AS and US? In terms of actualization, Transcendental Intelligence is revealed through the teachings—conveyed among other things through inspiration, prophecy (dreams, visions, voices), arduous spiritual travels, and theological meditation. The representations and messages of Transcendental Intelligence any given religion may offer its followers are limited to what can be made accessible to human beings. This explains the need for the mediating functions of shamans, oracles, prophecies, hermeneutics and others. In terms of virtualization, immanent acts stimulate or arouse the process of revelation of Transcendence: Practice encourages a more honed and inspirational reception of the Teachings, and their careful study can contribute to a renewal of their meanings. This is how the Immanent Community tries to glean a maximum of Transcendental Intelligence while also renewing its symbolic imagery. The dialectical interdependence between Transcendental Intelligence and the Teachings’ Immanence gives rise to sacred—rather than secular—wisdom.

Dialectic of Compassion UB / AB

Let us now examine the dialectical relationship between the Faith Community and the Republic of Minds. The Immanent Community AB may be organized in several different ways, generally by either specifying the types of relationships between a religion’s theological experts and the ranks of its layperson followers, or by highlighting different experts’ distinctive positions. Furthermore, individual experts and styles

within different traditions may also vary, e.g. shamans, ritual slaughterers, priests, prophets, sages, gurus, imams, clerics, monks, etc. Likewise, the Republic of Minds UB, in accordance with different traditions, may be represented in a number of different ways. The “City of God” may be monotheistic (Jews, Christians, Muslims, Baha’i, etc.), monistic (certain branches of Hinduism), dualist (the religion in ancient Persia), nontheistic (Buddhism), henotheistic, or polytheistic, etc. In addition to the deities, the “City of God” often includes a whole hierarchy of angels, demons, devas, dakinis, djinns and other spiritual helpers. The various elements associated with God in certain esoteric traditions, the divine persons in Christianity, the sephiras in the Kabbalah, the various Gnostic pleroma, and the deities or yidams in Tantric Buddhism also figure in the Republic of Minds. And we must not overlook the importance many religions associate with ancestors, saints and bodhisatvas, or the souls that inhabit the various imaginal worlds or transition between them: the circles of hell, gardens of Eden in paradise, divine palaces, pure lands—the structures and landscapes associated with the *other* world. Whether we consider the Earthly Community or the Heavenly Community, the primary problematic is relational: love versus hate, war versus peace, the hope uniting people versus the despair felt by the excluded, the balance found in justice versus the distortions produced by injustice, and noble beings’ loyalty versus traitors’ disloyalty. The individuals in the Earthly Community, in addition to observing ritual instructions, are encouraged to rid themselves of negative emotional tendencies (vices) and to nurture positive emotional energies (virtues) in themselves as well as in the wider Community. All this may boil down to a simple golden rule (Do to others as you would have them do to you) or to the love for our neighbour—which must nevertheless not be confused with hedonistic or egotistical love. It is not forbidden to connect this love for our neighbour (Lévitique XIX, 18 et 34) to spontaneous—or cultivated—sympathy or empathy, agape or philia in the Greek tradition, Christian charity, Muslim mercy, Buddhist compassion, or Confucian humanity, etc. In order that this horizontal interconnection based on empathy, compassion or humanity may develop into a decidedly positive consistency within the Earthly Community, a broader bidirectional vertical connection is needed. This involves the devotion directed upward towards the Heavenly World, on the one hand, and the compassionate blessings directed down onto the Earthly Community, on the other. The horizontal and vertical streams are complementary, co-dependent and perpendicular, just like electric force or magnetic attraction. Born of the emotional interdependence between the Community of believers and the Republic of Minds, we arrive at the dialectic of compassion.

Dialectic of spiritual strength UT / AT

Finally, let us analyze the relationship between religious Practice AT and Transcendental Causality UT. Religious Practice involves acts that earn the members of a faith community “merits” (or, when these acts are negative, incur demerits). Religious Practice can be divided into two loose, largely overlapping classes: spiritual Practices (development of faith, prayers, meditation, respect for positive and negative instructions, sacrifices, initiations, rituals, ceremonies, pilgrimages, etc.) and deeds that express believers’ ethical discipline (giving to the poor, acts of kindness and rectitude, pastoral functions, founding charitable or educational institutions, or any general contribution to human development). The acts performed by members of the Community are answered through actions arising from Transcendental Causality: karma, divine justice or grace, retribution, consequences determined by a cosmic order, etc. Religious Practice immediately enters into Transcendental Causality’s symbolic framework in order to enlarge the horizons of human activity, while the existence of Transcendental Causality in and of itself inspires and sustains religious Practice. In a manner of speaking, religious Practice pursues—although never concludes—a process that seeks to bring divine creation up to date. From a nontheistic perspective, we may say that whereas the consequences of acts are inevitable, understanding and accepting these consequences can pave the way for action that is as free as it is powerful. The secret of spiritual strength is contingent on the optimum interplay between humans’ religious Practices and Transcendental Causality.

Dialectic of Presence and Annunciation

Religion, or any form of spiritual life for that matter, is at a crossroads between two major dialectics. The vertical dialectic of Presence (U/A) connects Immanence to Transcendence, time to eternity, and the three-

dimensional matter of bodies to the realm of symbolic archetypes, which gives meaning human existence its meaning. The horizontal dialectic of Annunciation (S/B/T) allows for the articulation presence within a coherent semiotic architecture where Sacred Wisdom, Universal Compassion and Spiritual Strength can speak and answer to and condition one another. This is how spiritual life can project time-bound existence's transitory dust towards the invisible light of eternity. Hovering above the demented dance of ashes arising from the material, it can discern—and show—an image of fire, the infinite face that animates the other side of the world.

CONCLUSION

Restricting myself to the *letters* of the IEML alphabet only, some important religious “universals” have been described. Clearly, further research involving IEML words and texts is needed in order to define further universal concepts that may prove useful for distinguishing between various theological orientations and categorizing the many dimensions and manifestations of human spirituality. This transversal and comparative approach is not only useful for establishing a universal categorization system, but can also promote new forms of cultural dialogue and enhanced mutual understanding that are no longer beholden to the rigid and unwieldy biases associated with natural language vocabularies.

Since the notion of a universal language, or even just a computable semantics, is associated to very highly charged preconception, the author of this text is under no illusions about the chances for such a language to be realized. Nevertheless, if we consider aviation, for example, the conception of aircraft heavier than air that would be able to fly was also considered impossible for millennia before eventually becoming a common feature of everyday life. The two truisms most often cited to object to the ideas presented here are that every natural language has its own specific way to organize reality and that all meaning is context-dependent. I do not believe that these objections are valid. First, the metalanguage proposed here allows for reality to be organized in any number of ways. Second, specific contexts may be modelled with the help of hypertext graphs, optimized data-intensive flows, precisely addressed multimedia references, and formal rules to guide collective interpretation activity games. My book *The Semantic Sphere* addresses the concerns raised by those who fear my proposed categorization system would hamper the freedom to interpret or devise new conceptions. In particular, the book shows that a digital medium equipped with an IEML semantic sphere incorporating a hermeneutic memory would not only enable semantic interoperability but also offer the capacity to differentiate concepts and interpretations at a scale unprecedented in the history of intellectual technologies. The IEML semantic sphere represents a system of coordinates charting the infinitely complex universe of the mind and encompasses an unlimited variety of ideas ecosystems. The nodes contained in this system's grid would exceed the number of elementary particles contained in the physical universe. IEML imposes no limits on the potential expressions of new meanings and also offers an unlimited potential for making existing meanings more precise. Online creative conversations—currently organized on social media platforms and vast multiplayer games networks—would also benefit by the unfettered use of the semantic sphere to reflect on and model their own collective intelligence. Furthermore, it would provide a basis for exploring the vast ocean of available digital data with a view to producing a global hermeneutic memory. It would also help bring about the epistemological transformation of the humanities and social sciences so they can serve a truly multidimensional human development, as advocated by the digital humanities community.

The proposed metalanguage is certainly not an end in itself. It is intended neither as a purely commercial product nor as an ordinary technical application. It would be more apt to define it as a basic interdisciplinary research program with a purpose to attain an epistemological transformation in the humanities and social sciences and establish a global hypercortex that would allow users to reflect on humans' collective intelligence. IEML's potential to contribute to peace and humanism and to foster a more pluralistic and “civilized” social conversation is one of the main factors motivating the research described here.

The potential stakes for science and technology, and—dare I say it? —civilization are highly significant. Although it is impossible to predict the exact technological, economic and cultural outcomes this research program may produce over the next ten years, its true merits and values will emerge in the long run and will probably take several generations to bear fruit.

(Translated from French by Michael Varga)

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ⁱ Such as Aristotle's God, who exerts his influence on the world through attraction.

ⁱⁱ I have borrowed this term from Henri Corbin; in particular see the 4 volumes of his *En islam Iranien, aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, Gallimard, Paris, 1971-1972.