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CURRENT

DIALOGUE

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Editorial

This issue of *Current Dialogue* is special. The first three articles are in some way a tribute to the contributions of my colleague Dr Clare Amos, who retires from the World Council of Churches at the end of 2017 after over six years of outstanding service. Getting to know and work with Clare as a colleague over the past five years has been one of the greatest joys of my time at the World Council of Churches. The relentless passion she brings to her work, her unswerving focus, her rich gifts in the area of biblical scholarship, her wide-ranging experience in interreligious dialogue and, above all, her personality as someone who finds joy in the simple things in life—not least food, friendship and laughter—make her truly special. Since her arrival at the WCC, Clare has ensured that the programme of interreligious dialogue and cooperation retains a solid footing. She ensured the resumption of *Current Dialogue*, restored the practice of annual meetings between the staff of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) and the WCC's office of Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation, and re-established links with the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) and Al-Azhar mosque and University, Cairo. Words fail to express our gratitude to Clare for all her contributions.

This issue of *Current Dialogue* also deals with one of the most vexing topics of our times; namely, religion and violence. As Rev. Dr Sathianathan Clarke, Professor of Theology, Culture and Mission at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington DC, poignantly points out in his new book *Competing Fundamentalisms: Violent Extremism in Christianity, Islam and Hinduism*, “The gods have returned, but it is with a vengeance. Some of their most devout agents are turning fear of God into terror for the world.” In such a context, and seeking to move beyond the fatalism that often sees religion as a problem, this issue of *Current Dialogue* explores how religion can offer solutions to the common yearnings of pilgrims on the path of justice and peace.

We have included a selection of papers from the first two bilateral dialogues between the Muslim Council of Elders and the World Council of Churches, which took place in Geneva in September 2016 and Cairo in April 2017. The first of these dialogues, which also took place in the context of the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, focused on the theme “Towards an Integrated World.” The special lecture by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, His Eminence Professor Dr Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, on “The Responsibility of Religious Leaders for Achieving World Peace” to mark the 70th anniversary of Bossey is published here alongside other presentations from the dialogue that deal with the role of religions in promoting peace and countering violence and hatred. Also included are two presentations from the second dialogue, held in Cairo in April 2017 that focused on the theme “Citizenship and Peaceful Co-Existence.”

Another area where we witness the painful intersection of religion and violence is in gender-based discrimination. Also included in this issue of *Current Dialogue* are three papers from the Christian-Buddhist dialogue “En-Gendering Justice: Christians in Conversation with Buddhists on Religion, Gender, Sexuality and Power,” organized by the World Council of Churches and the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) in Bangkok. These papers examine the power dynamics of religions as manifested in gender relations, and explore the role of religion in overcoming discrimination and fostering a just and inclusive world. The yearning for dialogue to reinvent itself as ortho-praxis and contribute to human transformation was clearly felt during this dialogue. The need to do more, so that dialogue does not merely remain a dialogue of the head (intellectual), but becomes a dialogue of the hands (practical), was clearly reflected in the participants' affirmation: “Even as we continue to engage with our Buddhist and Christian wisdoms and take responsibility for individual and collective change, we also continue to be

challenged by the African song and concept of *senzenina*: What have we done, and what can we do better?”

The final article in this section, “Secularism and Religious Minority Rights” focuses on the issue of religious majoritarianism, which has and continues to bring religion and violence together in many parts of the world. The WCC has been actively involved in preventing the escalation of majoritarian religious nationalism by affirming the role of religious leaders in the prevention of violence and fostering inclusive societies. Recently, in collaboration with the Ecumenical United Nations Office in New York, the WCC partnered with the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and Responsibility to Protect (UNOGPRtoP) in a process that led to the creation of a Global Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes, launched this past July.¹ Given its new identity as a “transversal” following the Busan assembly, the WCC’s office of Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation has been actively collaborating with other programmatic areas especially the Churches Commission on International Affairs (CCIA) to deal with different aspects of violence, primarily exploring the role of religion and religious leaders and actors in fostering harmony, enhancing human dignity and protecting the fundamental rights of all peoples. A recent example is an interfaith symposium on statelessness, jointly organized with the UNHCR in partnership with the Council for World Mission in Rome.

The year 2017 has also been special because, for the first time in its history, the World Council of Churches organized a formal dialogue with Confucians in South Korea. This was largely made possible with the support of the Korea Forum for Science and Life and its convenor, the Rev. Dr Heup Young Kim. We are grateful for the support received from the National Council of Churches in Korea and Sungkyunkwan University. The generosity of our hosts in Andong, the City of Andong and the Korea Foundation for Culture and Ethics is acknowledged with deep gratitude. Given that this is a beginning, the main objective of the dialogue at this stage is to build mutual trust and respect. It is my hope that this dialogue will be the beginning of several dialogical encounters that lead to better understanding between the two religions, one that respects our differences and overcomes our fears and prejudices of the other. We intend to expand the ambit of our dialogue by reaching out to the Sikhs in 2018.

As we come to the end of yet another significant year and move into the 70th year of the WCC, we are all the more reminded that interreligious dialogue and cooperation in our times includes the task of being repairers of the breach and restorers of the paths of habitation (Isaiah 58:12). Even as the WCC embraces this responsibility as part of our identity as pilgrims on the path of justice and peace, we draw confidence and meaning in the recognition that this responsibility is part of our calling to give an account of the hope that is within us (1 Peter 3:15). In pursuing this calling in concrete and creative ways we find our fullest joy.

Rev Dr Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar, Programme Executive, Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation

¹ For details, see www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Plan%20of%20Action%20Advanced%20Copy.pdf.

Clare Amos Spins a Threefold Cord

Michael Ipgrave

It has been a privilege and a joy for me to work closely with Dr Clare Amos in a number of ways over the past fifteen years: on writing projects, in consultations and conferences, planning together programmes for education and dialogue, within the Church of England, through the Anglican Communion for Inter Faith Concerns (NIFCON), under the auspices of the World Council of Churches, and in other contexts. As somebody who has hugely enjoyed reading, thinking, writing and speaking alongside Clare, and who has learned a great deal from her, I am grateful for this opportunity briefly to share some reflections on her way of engaging theologially.

Clare is an unashamed Anglican, and it seems to me that her way of working exemplifies what Anglicans have described as the method of the “threefold cord.” Drawn from Ecclesiastes 4:12, which affirms that such a cord is “not easily broken,” this approach has come to identify the sources of theology as residing in Scripture, interpreted in the light of Tradition and of Reason. How then do we see Clare spinning out this threefold cord in her interfaith work for the churches?

In the first place, and very obviously, Clare’s work is grounded in the Bible – and, I might say, not only her work but her very person: you cannot talk to her for more than a few minutes before she will share with you her enthusiasm for some scriptural insight, or ask you how you read some passage, or possibly decry some hapless preacher she has heard misapply a verse. Her enthusiasm and her expertise are equally at home in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament, and can be described as engagement with text, involvement with narrative, and inhabitation of landscape.

Clare has a great love of words and a fluent facility in the biblical languages. She takes delight in finding some crux in the grammar,

some oddity in the vocabulary, some *double-entendre* in the meaning of a passage, believing that these can be points through which revelation can be disclosed in concentrated form – there are many such examples in her resourceful commentary on *Genesis*, to name but one piece of her writing. I have often thought that this respectfully close attention to textual detail has much in common with the methods of rabbinic commentary, and this became clear in meetings of the Anglican Jewish Commission of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, in which we have both shared. Belying its long-winded title, this has actually been a gathering of great warmth and energy, and I recall in particular the enthusiastic appreciation with which the rabbis present greeted a paper from Clare on the Psalms.

Clare’s reading of scripture, though, is not content to rest with the text as written on the page. She brings to her interpretation a deep human empathy, sensitive to the hopes, fears, and emotions of the characters as they develop in biblical narratives, and always seeking to link those to contemporary experience. Uncharacteristically aware of the popular end of British TV culture, with its long-running soap *East Enders*, I remember her, on one occasion, half-seriously proposing to produce a television series about the patriarchal stories of the Pentateuch, which she proposed to call *Middle East Enders*. She would balk, though, at my use here of the word “patriarchal”: Clare’s empathetic reading of biblical narrative is always conscious of these stories as gendered, as she brings her identity as woman, as wife, as mother, as daughter to the text. More widely, my experience has been that she always looks for contemporary stories which in some way echo, resonate with, or comment on biblical passages as keys to unlock the multiple meanings of scripture. And it is from this kind of process that her own theological insights grow:

following her great mentor Bishop Kenneth Cragg, she knows that true theology is always cast in the mode of biography.

Scripture is for Clare not only text and narrative; it is also a landscape which in some sense she inhabits, and in whose contours she feels at home. This was literally true for her as a young woman when she spent time at the *École Biblique* and St George's College in Jerusalem, and acquired both a detailed knowledge and a lasting love of the city and of the Holy Land. One of her most widely read and persuasive publications is the ingeniously named *Peace-ing Together Jerusalem*. This small but elegant volume expresses with wisdom, sensitivity, and a careful attention to the nuances of language the aspiration and prayer for peace which must be in the heart of all who love the holy city, and all who read the scriptures with imagination and longing.

And what of the other two threads which make up Clare's threefold cord? "Tradition" and "Reason" have been very variously defined, but I want to take up here an Anglican explanation which Clare commended to me, and which we used together in drafting the Anglican Communion's statement on interfaith relations, *Generous Love*. This stated that tradition and reason can be understood as an "appeal respectively to the mind of the Church as that develops and to the mind of the cultures in which the Church participates" – and it went on to say that the two are inseparable.

In this sense, certainly Clare is a deeply traditional Christian. She has a whole-hearted commitment to exploring the mind of the Church. An avid theological reader, she is not reticent in sharing the fruit of her research with others: so many of our conversations begin with her pulling two or three bulky tomes from her capacious bag and instructing me: "You really should read these." Far more than just reading, though, Clare has played an active and influential part in shaping and in expressing the mind of the Church, at least the Anglican bit of it, in the area of interfaith relations – a contribution

rightly recognized when she was awarded a Lambeth Doctorate by the Archbishop of Canterbury. It is important to recognize that she has done this as a lay woman member of the Church of England. Despite being based in some ways at the "centre" of church life, she has maintained a healthy critical distance from all forms of churchiness, combining a proper respect for episcopal authority with an equally proper disregard for prelatical posturing.

Clare's respect for tradition reaches back into detailed knowledge of the Church of England's own history of engagement with people of other religions, particularly through the scholars associated with its mission societies USPG and CMS, with both of which she has had a close relationship. But she also is aware of a spectacularly broad geographical range of contexts in which tradition is shaped in the contemporary church. Her work at the Anglican Communion Office embraced not only interfaith concerns, but also theological education across the Communion, with a particular energy being directed into study of the place of the Bible in the Church in very different cultural and missiological settings. This was only able to develop and flourish through the many friendships which she has formed with scholars, educators, and church leaders across the globe; a network which was richly deepened and expanded when she took up her role at the WCC. As a result, Clare is somebody with a unique listening ear for the mind of the *oikoumene* as it expresses the contemporary tradition of the churches with historical resonance in this area.

And so to reason. There can be no doubt that Clare's reasoning skills are razor-sharp, and I know that it can be a daunting experience to find oneself on the opposite side of an argument to her. But if reason is to be understood theologically, not merely as a tool for argumentation but as "an appeal to the mind of the cultures in which the Church participates," then for somebody involved in interfaith work for a worldwide communion or council of churches, it must involve the ability and the commitment to listen carefully

to the thinking of people of other faith traditions. I owe this insight to Clare when we were discussing the shape of an Anglican document on theological resources for Christians experiencing persecution; she insisted that it was right to include within this views of persecution within other faiths as this was an important component of the strand of reason applied to theological method.

Both in her time working for the Anglican Communion and at the World Council of Churches, Clare has exemplified what it means to listen attentively, respectfully, and insightfully to people of different faiths, as her gloriously wide network of friends testifies. That extensive and intensive listening has been made possible by a number of things: an enormous and unstoppable energy; a shrewd and retentive memory; a disciplined and organized diary; and above all, an innate capacity for forming and sustaining friendships. Clare has spoken often of friendliness as a distinctive Anglican charism offered to the interfaith world. I am myself less confident than her that all Anglicans are blessed with this gift, but I certainly know that she fully embodies it herself.

What then is the kind of theology that emerges for Clare from the friendly application of this threefold cord to our multi-faith world today? Because she knows that world is a complicated, messy place, I think it right to say that Clare has never evinced much enthusiasm for systematic theology. Rather, to use the title of a chapter which she and I co-wrote on Anglican approaches to interfaith work, it is a matter of displaying an “untidy generosity”: a readiness to see the grace of God at work in

lots of different places and people, and to rejoice in that. My sense is that for Clare – and for many of us who have learned from her example – such untidiness is not just a matter of human response; it also points beyond us to the God whose boundless generosity we can never tidy up. At this point, theological reason fails us, even when expressed in words as beautifully crafted as Clare’s, and we have to move to prayer in the face of divine mystery.

Clare is married to Alan, who is a poet, and both of them have a gift of shaping prayers which gather up the complexities of our human interactions and point us beyond to the God of all the world. At the heart of all Clare’s work, I sense that there is this desire to encourage us all to move onwards together into the presence of mystery. Even the words of prayers are inadequate here, but perhaps icons can open a window onto the divine. Especially dear to Clare is the great gospel scene of the Transfiguration, and her first impulse on entering any church will be to track down any images of Jesus on the Holy Mountain. She has told me how powerful it is for her to see in that scene all our human messiness illumined and transformed by uncreated light from the Saviour’s face. It is my hope and prayer that when she leaves her role at the WCC she will find time to write the great book of her life, a theological exploration of the Transfiguration. We will all be enriched by that.

Bishop Michael Ipgrave is the 99th Bishop of the Diocese of Lichfield of the Church of England.

The Fruit of Many Gifts: The Contribution of Dr Clare Amos to Interfaith Dialogue

Lucinda Mosher

If memory serves correctly, it was on a brief research trip to England in the winter of 2003 that I first met Clare Amos. A portion of my doctoral studies had attended to Anglican Communion conduct of interreligious relations in the 1980s and 1990s. I wanted to know where this work had now headed. Friends in the Church of England, therefore, made sure that I had a chance for a robust conversation with Clare at the Anglican Communion Office. I recall being struck by her bearing—at once “no nonsense” and kind. I was honoured that she saw in me—a doctor of theology for barely a year, but a grandmother for several—something worth nurturing. The outcome of that conversation was an invitation for me to join the management group of the Anglican Communion Network of Inter Faith Concerns (NIFCON) as its North American representative—a role, albeit a small one, to play in Anglicanism’s efforts to further interreligious understanding. At Clare’s invitation and with her encouragement, I attended NIFCON’s first-ever international consultation, August 30–September 3, 2003, in Bangalore—a wonderful opportunity to see her in action! During the years since, there have been scattered opportunities to be with Clare in person; I recall at least one instance of meeting for breakfast in one of Manhattan’s iconic corner diners. However, most of our work together has taken place via email: her occasional requests that I edit or author something; my queries—usually about Anglican Communion or World Council of Churches documents, to which she has always responded graciously and quickly. Though it has been sporadic, in every instance it has been of great value to me. It is, therefore, my great pleasure to write this appreciation of Clare Amos’s contribution to interfaith dialogue.

Clare’s heart for and prowess in addressing multifaith concerns are informed by her

training and early career as a biblical scholar. Study at the University of Cambridge and *École biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem* (to which she was the first non-Roman Catholic woman to be admitted) prepared her for work at St George’s College (Jerusalem), the office of the Middle East Council of Churches (Beirut), and the Near East School of Theology (also Beirut). Years of experience of the lived realities of these contexts brought deepened awareness of the challenges for close reading and interpretation of the Bible and, relatedly, of the complexities of Christian-Jewish relationship, as Clare has often pointed out in her writing and public speaking.² Upon her return to England, she taught at Wescott House (Cambridge), served as Theological Resource Officer of the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, and Secretary to the Anglican Primates Working Party on Theological Education (TEAC).

Clare’s influence in the interfaith arena expanded significantly when, in August 2001, she became coordinator/convenor of NIFCON—a post she held until September 2010. Chaired by three bishops, NIFCON’s purpose was to assist the Anglican Communion in building interfaith relationships, easing interreligious tensions, coordinating Anglican participation in interfaith conferences, facilitating theological reflection about interfaith concerns at all levels, and making available resources for dialogue and research. For nine years, Clare provided this initiative consistent, hands-on leadership, theological and practical insight, and concrete support. Under her watch, NIFCON was especially active in tracking Christian-Muslim relations, including the Anglican dialogue with Al-Azhar University. As information and analysis was gathered, it

² See, for example, her essay “Text, Tribulation and Testimony: The Bible in the Context of the Middle East,” in *Current Dialogues* 53 (December 2012), 39–50.

was shared via *Christian Muslim Digest*—which she edited. While many people in the Anglican Communion Office and the host institutions must be credited with the success of NIFCON’s international consultations in Bangalore, India (2003) and Kaduna, Nigeria (2007), Clare was pivotal to the conception, organization, delivery, and follow-up on each. Bible study being intrinsic to NIFCON’s consultative methodology, she organized these daily exercises and took her turn as one of a small team of Bible-study leaders.

In January 2006, Clare was appointed Director of Theological Studies for the Anglican Communion. However, her work with the NIFCON Management Group continued. In anticipation of the 2008 Lambeth Conference—a once every ten years gathering of Anglican bishops—she was instrumental in preparation of NIFCON study materials for Lambeth 2008’s session on interreligious relations.³ As well, she was a key member of the small group responsible for determining the shape and contents of a theological document for use during the conference and beyond. Once drafted by Michael Ipgrave (then Inter Faith Relations Adviser to the Archbishops’ Council of the Church of England), Clare was the person most responsible for ensuring this treatise’s publication and promulgation as *Generous Love: The truth of the Gospel and the call to dialogue—An Anglican theology of inter faith relations*, making effective use of her Anglican Communion Office base and contacts. She was also involved in producing material for a *Generous Love* study guide.

Some years later, Clare Amos and Michael Ipgrave (now Bishop of Lichfield) co-authored a chapter on the import of *Generous Love* for inclusion in *The Oxford Handbook of Anglican Studies*.⁴ Entitled “An Untidy

Generosity: Anglicans and the Challenge of Other Religions,” it begins by noting that release of the NIFCON report, *Generous Love* and delivery by then-Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams of an eloquent but much maligned speech on the relationship shariah and the English legal system both occurred on the same day: February 8, 2008. These co-authors use this coincidence to highlight “distinct, but complementary aspects of current Anglican engagement with the challenge of other religions: on the one hand, the need for Anglicans to articulate clear theological understanding in order to strengthen the life of the church; on the other hand, an equally important need for what can be risky engagement with today’s globalized world of many Faiths.” Their thesis is that, while constructive engagement of other religions is “a challenge which is not universally welcomed throughout the Anglican Communion,” it is nevertheless one that “many Anglicans are determined to meet, both at grass-roots level and on the part of the church hierarchy and structures.”⁵

Clare’s having been named a World Council of Churches Ecumenical Scholar in 1973, makes it all the more fitting that a WCC post would provide a capstone to her career. Her appointment as Programme Coordinator and Executive for Inter-Religious Dialogue and Cooperation having become effective in September 2011, one of her first duties was to attend the Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi, Italy (27 October 2011). This would be but the first of many public appearances representing the WCC. For example, Clare was an attendee at two of the many commemorations of the 50th anniversary of the promulgation of the groundbreaking Vatican II interreligious-relations document *Nostra Aetate*. In her remarks at one of those—an event sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (October 2015)—she was able, as a WCC officer, to

³ Michael Jackson, “Engaging in a Multi-Faith World 2,” in *Christ and Culture: Communion After Lambeth*, ed. Martyn Percy, Mark Chapman, Ian Markham, and Barney Hawkins (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2010), 119–32, at 122.

⁴ Clare Amos and Michael Ipgrave, “An Untidy Generosity: Anglicans and the Challenge of Other Religions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Anglican Studies*, eds. Mark D. Chapman

and Sathianathan Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 427–49.

⁵ Clare Amos and Michael Ipgrave, “An Untidy Generosity,” 427.

stress the importance of that document to Christians beyond the Roman Catholic Church: how it helped bodies such as the WCC see “serious interreligious engagement ... as an intrinsic necessity rather than an optional extra for our work.”⁶

Likewise noteworthy have been Clare’s presentations at the conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews, Rome (July 2015); her remarks at the Symposium on the Role of Religion and Faith-Based Organizations in International Affairs (February 2016); or her keynote speech for the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue conference (June 2017) on the role and visibility of women in interfaith dialogue and theological education. These and Clare’s many other public addresses have left their mark on the furthering of interreligious understanding. So has the fact that, since September 2016, the WCC has been in formal conversation with the Muslim Council of Elders/Al Azhar Al Sharif—a dialogue Clare was instrumental in establishing.

All of that said, Clare’s impact on interfaith dialogue during her tenure with the WCC has been most broadly felt through her rejuvenation of the journal *Current Dialogue*. When she assumed its editorship, it had suffered a publishing lacuna of nearly four years (February 2008–December 2011). However, during that spell, the WCC had held several intra-Christian consultations on Christian self-understanding in the context of other religions, but the proceedings of these had never been circulated. Clare’s immediate concern was to make available the fruits of meetings which, in fact, had been part of a larger project that began in 2002, with the WCC’s effort to craft a statement on “Religious Plurality and Christian Self-Understanding”—a project she was now charged with bringing to closure.

In fact, Clare had represented the Anglican Communion at that 2002 meeting, which resulted in the drafting of an unofficial

statement by the following year. Consideration of that document during the WCC Assembly of 2006 (Porto Alegre) led to a series of consultations on Christian self-understanding in the context of each of several other religions: Islam (2008), Buddhism (2009), Judaism (2010), Hinduism (2011), and indigenous religions (2012). Clare was a participant in the 2010 consultation in her role with the ACO, and in the 2011 and 2012 meetings as a WCC officer.

As editor of *Current Dialogue*, Clare’s immediate move was to prepare three Special Issues devoted to reporting on this process. *Current Dialogue* 51 (December 2011), on Christian self-understanding in the context of Buddhism, featured many of the papers from examination of that topic during the December 2009 consultation. *Current Dialogue* 52 (July 2012), on the context of Islam, brought together papers first given in 2008. As Clare points out in her editorial for that issue, this meant that pieces that had been delivered precisely one year after the issuance of *A Common Word Between Us and You*—the now-famous pan-Muslim call for Christian-Muslim dialogue—were hereby being published some five years after—thus providing the WCC journal’s readers with unique perspective on that initiative.⁷ *Current Dialogue* 53 (December 2012) was a digest of the WCC consultation on Christian self-understanding in relation to Judaism (Istanbul, June 2010), when Clare was still Director of Theological Studies in the Anglican Communion Office, with responsibility for theological education and interfaith concerns. Thus, Clare herself had been a delegate. Therefore, among the items included in *Current Dialogue* 53 is a version of the Anglican perspectival paper she had delivered in 2010, plus her essay on “The Bible in the Context of the Middle East.”⁸ Reports on the consultations on Hinduism (2011) and indigenous religions (2012), plus a paper each from the consultations on Islam (2008) and Buddhism (2009), took their

⁶ *Current Dialogue* 58, 2.

⁷ For details, see <http://www.acommonword.com/>.

⁸ *Current Dialogue* 53 (December 2012), 72–75 and 39–50, respectively.

places in *Current Dialogue* 54 (July 2013). With the aid of all of this, plus meetings in Bossey, Geneva, and Nairobi, an official summary report and reflection was penned. With the publication of that document, entitled “Who Do We Say That We Are?: Christian Self-Identity in a Multi-Religious World,” in *The Ecumenical Review*, 66:4 (December 2014) and as a booklet in 2015—this long and complex process of Christian self-examination was brought to an end—an achievement Clare anticipated with joy in her editorial for *Current Dialogue* 56 (December 2014).

In the nine issues of *Current Dialogue* that have gone to press under Clare Amos’s guidance,⁹ Christian identity in the midst of religious manyness has been a persistent theme, but far from the only matter receiving attention. *Current Dialogue* 54 included essays on interreligious engagement by Rowan Williams, Michael Fitzgerald, and Lesmore Gibson Ezekiel; tributes to John Hick, Kenneth Cragg, Pope Shenouda III, Patriarch Ignatius IV Hazim; and an essay by Clare herself on “Cooperation, Conversion and Christian Witness.” In her editorial for *Current Dialogue* 56 (December 2014), Clare noted how the relationship between interchurch and interreligious dialogue “can be either creative, or difficult, or a mixture of both,”¹⁰ a matter taken up in interesting ways by this issue’s essays. Many of them focused on interreligious challenges in a specific geographical context. Among them was a report the WCC’s relationship with the Centre for Interreligious Dialogue (Tehran). Thomas Schirrmacher’s was, by contrast, an assessment of the document “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct,” three years after its release (in June 2011) as a joint venture by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the World Council of Churches, and the World Evangelical Alliance, on the occasion of its third anniversary. Number 58 (November 2016)

celebrated the 50th anniversary of the groundbreaking Vatican II interreligious relations document *Nostra Aetate* by giving special attention to the matter of whether there be a special relationship between Christianity and Judaism—thus published responses from a dozen Jewish and Christian scholars, Clare herself among them, to that question.

While *Current Dialogue* 55 (September 2013) and 57 (December 2015) were edited by Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar, who had joined the WCC staff early in 2013 as Programme Executive in Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation. Clare herself was a contributor to each. For the 2013 issue, which brought together a wide range of reflections on the supplication “God of life, lead us to justice and peace” (the theme of the WCC’s Tenth Assembly), she wrote on complexities inherent in, and unintended consequences of the practice of referring (in print or in public speaking, particularly when done by Europeans and Americans) to Christians in certain contexts as “minority/minorities”. For the 2015 issue, which focused on “Multiple Religious Belonging: Exploring Hybridity, Embracing Hospitality,” her contribution was an essay on “Reading Ruth Interreligiously”—foregrounding once again her formidable skill as a biblical scholar.

In October 2012, Clare received twofold, much deserved recognition: by the conferral of a Lambeth Doctor of Divinity honouring her “significant contribution on behalf of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion to interfaith and ecumenical engagement, to theological education and learning and to the dissemination of biblical studies,”¹¹ followed eight days later by a Doctor of Humane Letters from Berkeley Divinity School, Yale University, honouring her furthering of “conversations in Anglican theology and interfaith understanding

⁹ Amos is editor of *Current Dialogue* 51–54, 56 and 58; co-editor, with Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar, of *Current Dialogue* 55, 57 and 59.

¹⁰ *Current Dialogue* 56 (December 2014), 2.

¹¹ Lambeth doctorate citation, as quoted in “WCC staff member Clare Amos received two doctorates,” 10 December 2012, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/wcc-staff-member-clare-amos-received-two-doctorates>.

through her teaching all over the world,”¹² her fine conference lectures, and her many publications—among them, two Bible commentaries¹³ and *A Faithful Presence*, a festschrift edited with David Thomas for the Rt Rev Kenneth Cragg, her mentor, on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday.¹⁴ While those honours recognize Clare’s work in the arena of interreligious engagement on behalf of the Anglican Communion, in a sense they also underscored the important, great gifts she had brought along to her then still relatively new office at the World Council of Churches: biblical scholar, theological educator, public speaker, author, editor, dialogician. Those gifts have borne much fruit in the Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation Programme, but largely because Clare possesses others: wit, wisdom, and a way with words; generosity of spirit; and an ability to see and marshal potential in others. Like that of her mentor Kenneth Cragg, Clare Amos’s presence in her World Council of Churches office has been a faithful one—and interfaith dialogue is the richer for it.

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¹² “The 2012 Berkeley Convocation” in *Berkeley Divinity School Newsletter* (Winter 2013), 3.

¹³ *Beginning Over Again: Through Lent with Genesis and the Gospels* (Peterborough, UK: Inspire, 2005) and *The Book of Genesis* (London: The Epworth Press, 2004).

¹⁴ David Thomas, with Clare Amos, *A Faithful Presence: Essays for Kenneth Cragg* (London: Melisende, 2003).

“Mission-Shaped Church” in a Knotted Interreligious Age

Sathianathan Clarke

This is an explorative paper to help us think together differently as *oikoumene*. It starts with a broad reading of the age in which we live. The historical shift taking place today, I contend, has the human community in a knotted situation. The threat of materialism and secularization, which has been the canvas on which mission theology in the West has been painted, is brazenly and forcefully being joined by the growing menace of violent religious fundamentalisms.¹ Theology is thus called upon to think about what it means to be stewards of the Christian gospel in a world of enflamed and colliding religious passion. What is the vocation of a mission-shaped church within such a complex interreligious setting?

This essay identifies and elaborates upon three theological affirmations that have missiological implications for being church in the 21st century. Firstly, mission-shaped church embraces the consequential nature of its existence. The church is transfigured through its response to what God is already doing in love for the world. Secondly, mission-shaped church points to the possibility that the church is also fashioned by other human agents. God is not without unforeseen and unlikely co-workers in a wonderfully diverse world. Thirdly, while the mission-shaped church celebrates the roominess of an inclusive Trinity, it also adapts to the cruciform life, teaching and praxis of Jesus set in motion in the world by the life-giving Spirit. This acknowledges the specificity of the Lordship of Christ over the church without discounting the spacious working of the Holy Trinity. Its

responsibility lies in bringing together the distinctiveness of Christian embassy and the capaciousness of interfaith hospitality within God’s manifold, inhabited world.

Religion in the 21st century flat world: betwixt and between religious apathy and violent pathology

Our round world is declared to be flat. It is said to be characterized by the free flow of economic and cultural goods, from anywhere to everywhere. Of course, the irony is that this same world has never been more economically unequal. The human work of flattening the world has also resulted in creating a more economically hierarchical one. One notable feature in this so-called flatter world is the global rearrangement of religious peoples and their respective faith professions. This *religioscape*, a term that corresponds with landscape, which tended to identify respective religions with particular landmasses and socio-cultural locations, is changing radically the world over.² No longer can one region realistically wish to think of the world as having a mono-religious future. Most regions are increasingly multi-religious, with the secular option also becoming more pronounced. Thus, the levelling of world markets to allow for the easy movement of goods and services has also allowed for a wide scope of religious concepts, commodities, peoples and institutions to cross traditional boundaries. To be a mission-shaped church in our age increasingly involves the challenge of witnessing and working in the context of real religious diversity, often knotted into each other. To prepare to be such a church in the 21st century will require that we realize that

¹ For a systematic analysis of competing religious fundamentalisms, see my recently published book: Sathianathan Clarke, *Competing Fundamentalisms: Violent Extremism in Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017).

² Arjun Appadurai started extending the image of landscape into other spheres: ethnoscape, technoscape, finanscape, mediascapes and ideoscapes. See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis, 1996).

this religiously plural world is both our local and global context.

Unfortunately, drastic shifts in our global religiouscape are not occurring harmoniously. Drawing closer has also led to increased hostility toward religiously different neighbours. In fact, our third millennium has witnessed an unprecedented growth in violent religious fundamentalisms. It was symbolized by the spectacularly violent events of 11 September 2001 in the United States and its retaliatory aftermath in Iraq. But it has continued to still play out in various forms and in various regions of the world. In the name of “war against [Islamic] terror,” the jihadist “battle against infidels,” the “Hindutva taming of non-Indic peoples,” the “fervently Orthodox” violent Jews, or “cowboy monks” killing Rohingya Muslims, religions are exhibiting the cruel side of religious extremism. Globalization and religious fundamentalism are somewhat coupled. The aggressive ethos of markets combine with violent religious sources to wrest control of the shrinking world. The flattening of the world has not therefore led to much flattery for religion. There is a dangerous growth of “muscular religion,” which is turning out to be the expansion of hurtful and harmful expressions of religious faithfulness across the world.

The historical context within which we reflect upon our calling to be church is quite different from a few decades ago. Then we assumed that the main problem in the world was one of moral relativism and religious apathy. The challenge that confronted the church in the latter part of the 20th century was a secularized generation steeped in relativism, which made it a gullible target for mammon, meaninglessness and market-driven self-indulgence. Today, in the 21st century, the challenge for the church also comes from a shift in the opposite direction. We are witnessing the rise of a moral and religious absolutism that funds religious fundamentalism. The problem is not only relativism, which is intimately tied up with the collapse of a universal moral framework. The problem in our time also stems from

absolutism. The emergence of “strong religion”³ (Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist faces of religious fundamentalism) has become a major cause of violence in our world. It is within this complex set of contexts, where religions are physically drawing closer together but also more hostile to each other that I wish to raise the question as to what it means to be a mission-shaped church in the context of world religions.

“Mission-shaped” rather than missional church

Why the term “mission-shaped church?” Is not mission itself a word packed with misdirected Christian engagement in the affairs of other cultures and religious communities in the world? In choosing mission-shaped rather than “missional”, I underscore the moderately reflexive and openly submissive dimensions of the church. Offering “missional” as an adverb to the church, which lives amongst a people who want to configure a New World Order and who wish to export sequels of *Mission Impossible* in a flat world market, is not a prudent choice either for the West or the rest. I am not implying that all Western mission was and is colonial. Many were and many were not. Some are and others are not. Christian mission, I believe, to rephrase Paul Chung, has been and continues to be “a tumbled mixture of [deadly] guns, [avaricious] greed, and amazing grace.”⁴ However, the choice to disassociate from mission is a contextual one. I am writing from the West, more specifically, the United States of America, which cannot but face up to the intricate relationship between aggressive capital expansion and assertive Christian mission. I might have opted for a term that conveyed much more of a commitment to self-agency and a sense of task-urgency if I was reflecting upon this theme from within a majority world

³ Gabriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby & Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalism around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁴ Paul S. Chung, *Public Theology in an Age of World Christianity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 235.

perspective that wants to bring the gospel from the global South to the North. However, taming imperial agency is what may be more instructive to us in the West.

While evacuating agency from the buzz of human work, which drives the hyperactivity of the missional church, the emphasis in claiming the term *mission-shaped* posits the charge for vitality back into God. Mission-shaped is thus not about being success-poised into the future or devoted to being faithful to the past. Instead, it is about being joyfully present to and willfully available for what God is doing in the world. Christian communities, by invoking such an adjective, call the church to be shaped by God's activity in the here and now. Yet one must also not forget that there are many more operational and positive characteristics that accompany this qualifier. A mission-shaped church is therefore also a God-centred, world-transforming, Spirit-driven, poor-embracing, wisdom-serving, kingdom-escalating and Christ-modeled community. Understanding the church in such an interrelational and integrated perspective, I believe, offers us the opportunity to blend together its reflexive and agential vocation. But what does it mean to say that the church is called to be mission-shaped in our context of religious plurality? I submit that reclaiming this central feature of the church mainly lifts up three complex yet interrelated theological affirmations. These, I believe, have ecclesiological and missiological implications for the contemporary context briefly discussed here.

Church as plastic, *missio Dei* as agential, and kingdom as primary

Mission-shaped church iterates the sometimes forgotten idea that the church's existence is transfigured by its response to what God is already doing in love for the life of the world.⁵ In the modern West, Karl Barth is credited to be the first Protestant theologian in 1932 to suggest the idea that

⁵ For a detailed description, see David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 390ff.

mission is in fact an activity of the Triune God Himself (*missio Dei*) to which the church (*missio ecclesia*) responds because of divine knowledge made available in Jesus Christ and in which it can become engaged through the power of the Holy Spirit.⁶ This was later developed into a Trinitarian mission theology at the International Missionary Council meeting at Willingen (1952). Thus, "the classic doctrine of the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another "movement": Father, Son and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world."⁷ This made the church acutely aware of its responsive and, consequently, secondary identity.

The church submits to taking on a gestalt in conformity with God's mission. So as not to think of mission apart from the being of God, Bevans and Schroeder challenge us to think more organically: "Not that God *has* a Mission, but that God *is* mission."⁸ Drawing on this idea but putting this in my own idiom, I see two facets to God as Mission. Mission is, on the one hand, what God is within God's triune self: in love each member of the Trinity becomes empty and becomes filled by their inter-being. But mission is also, on the other hand, what God is for the world: in love the divine inter-being overflows to encompass all of creation into a richer communion.⁹ The result is a decisive shift from thinking of mission as something

⁶ As early as in 1882, Keshub Chunder Sen, an Indian philosopher pointed to the priority of this sending movement of the Trinitarian God. "At the Apex is the very God Jehovah, the Supreme Brahma of the Vedas. From Him comes down the Son, in a direct line, an emanation from Divinity. This God descends and touches one end of the base of humanity, then running all along the base permeates the world, and then by the power of the Holy Spirit drags up degenerate humanity to Himself." As quoted in Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1975), 34.

⁷ Stephen B. Bevan and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 290.

⁸ Stephen B. Bevan and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 10.

⁹ Although not explicit, this classical twofold distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity is hinted at in Bevans and Schroeder, *Ibid.*, 10-17.

that must be shaped by and for the church to inviting the church to take on its form and work out its function in response to the Triune Mission God in over-flowing communion with the world. In the words of the report entitled *Mission-Shaped Church* "the Church is the fruit of God's mission, and that as such it exists to serve and to participate in the on-going mission of God."¹⁰ The church is a crystallization of those who have enlisted to be part of God's mission through Jesus Christ. The sentness of the church in the way of Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit is an expression of God's love for the world. *Missio Dei* is God's "spending sending love"¹¹ for the life of the world. The church is the bread gathered up and recreated out of fragmented, motley crumbs. It is also the bread broken and dispersed for the life of all.¹²

Because of this theological insight, narrow church undertakings are relativized by broad kingdom activities, which gather up the multiplex nature of God's mission in the world. Boff reminds us that by proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God, Jesus shifts the focus from "who God is" to "how God acts": "God acts to build and bring about the kingdom of God" to usher new life for the whole of creation.¹³ However, in much Christian deliberation, *this* God and *His* mission are delineated without theological consideration for and missiological contribution from other religious expressions and mission constellations. Churches are no doubt learning to be humble in acknowledging that their own mission takes place alongside other Christians in response to the mission of God

in the world. The stress on *missio Dei* generates cooperative room for the multiple agendas of various denominational churches wanting to affect the life of the world. They are now sent alongside each other even as their God precedes them into the world. This might explain why the 20th century, which was proclaimed to be *the* mission century, ended up being more an era of ecumenism. What is not challenged in such an ecumenically fertile mission theology is the universal church's monopoly to define the *missio Dei* solely by its own take on God; its peculiar interpretation on the culture, religion and politics of other human beings; and its particular view of life for the whole world. The way forward, I contend, is not merely to de-emphasize the primary agency of the church in relation to God's mission to grow the kingdom. Rather, it lies as well in a renegotiation of the many agents (individuals and communities) that are already partners in the *missio Dei*, which may reimagine a richer conception of life within God's kingdom in our wonderfully diverse world. This brings me to my next point.

Trinitarian life, overflowing love and realignment of mission partners in communion¹⁴

Mission-shaped church points to the possibility that it is fashioned by human agents that are already drawn into the Trinitarian God's kingdom activity in a variety of local situations. Often we think of

¹⁰ *Mission-Shaped Church*, xi.

¹¹ The words of Tim Sledge in Paul Bayes and Tim Sledge, *Mission-Shaped Parish: Traditional Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2006), 136.

¹² "One of the most important things Christians need to know about the Church is that the Church is not of ultimate importance...the point of the Church is not the Church itself...The point of the Church is rather to point beyond itself, to be a community that preaches, serves, and witnesses to the reign of God." Bevan and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 7.

¹³ Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 28.

¹⁴ In much of my thinking about the Trinity as Divine inter-being of life, love, and communion that overflows into the whole world as the purposive mission of God for the wellbeing of all of creation, I am deeply indebted to five theologians: Raimon Pannikar, Leonardo Boff, S. Mark Heim, Elizabeth A. Johnson, and Jürgen Moltmann. I have read them with great interest over three decades and they have helped make theology meaningful and fruitful to me as a "Servant of Jesus Christ" and as a "steward of God's mysteries" (1 Corinthians 4:1, "Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries"). See especially Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013); Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988); S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007); and Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

the operations of the Trinity taking place in three kairotic historical periods – a form of “chronological modalism.” First, there is the era of God the Creator (Father), which is followed by the age of the Redeemer (Son), which leads to the final aeon of the Sanctifier (Holy Spirit). We thus largely ignore the theological affirmation that the Trinitarian nature of God is “from everlasting to everlasting [throughout which] you are God” (Psalm 90:2). If the primordial nature of God is continuously characterized by its triune movement then God has, is, and will always be known by God’s already-always inward enjoyment of inter-being and outward overflow of this communion to affect the wellbeing of the world. The eternal overflow of the love at the heart of the Triune One, which saturates creation for the sake of life, is constant. It is within this divine vitality, which spans from alpha to omega, that all creatures live, move and have their being. Taking a cue from Raimon Panikkar, I am inclined to invoke the language of Triune movement to create theological space for thinking inter-religiously. Re-conceptualizing the Trinity as an everlasting movement that encompasses all creation, he suggests, “Relations within the bosom of the Trinity are dynamic relations, in constant movement. The Father never ceases to engender, nor the Son to be engendered, and the Spirit is the permanent expression of this dynamism. We participate in this dynamism of begetting inasmuch as we too are begotten. We cannot be simple spectators.”¹⁵ All human beings are drawn into the working of God by which the kingdoms of the earth will become the province for the reign of God.

The Triune God can in its most spacious and inclusive nature be conceived of as three movements dispensing life, love and communion among all God’s creation even as in a more contained and specific instance this trinity is expressed by the Christian symbols of the Father/Mother, Son and Holy Spirit. It is because all human beings are birthed and nourished by the divine

outpouring of life, love and communion that the mission-shaped church must be open to others, however different they might be, as co-partners in God’s mission in love for the world. In the broadest of terms, let me say that for me, the Triune God can be conceptualized as generosity of life, graciousness of love and bountifulness of communion. Much more concretely, and certainly confined to Christian theology, the Trinity can also be conceptualized fairly specifically as God the Creator, Jesus the Revealer, and Spirit the Sanctifier. The first divine movement makes me theologically receptive to the open-ended mission of God that is inclusive and cooperative; the second divine movement modifies this openness by recounting the specificity of this mission as manifest in the Christian witness.

Much of our thinking will be roomier if we think about the question of whether God is operational in the world through other religions after we accept the implications of our Trinitarian faith. The space that is generated by the Trinity opens up many possibilities for moving away from the constriction imposed by our “Jesus only” mission-thinking pattern. One need not sacrifice Jesus Christ. One is merely invited to extract mileage from the expansive relational possibilities inherent in the surplus potential of the divine Trinity. Risking Jesus for God’s sake may in fact be the Christ-way to fullness of life for the whole world. Loosening the bonds of “Jesus only” thinking to unleash the charisma and operations of God the creator and God the sanctifier is to discover much theological spaciousness. So, one may need to let God be God for life, through love, and in communion for the whole created world. To push this daringly along the same direction, one might imagine that the points of contact between (and in-between) the three persons of the Trinity have much promise for canalizing divine leakage of gracious, loving and bountiful energy from the heart of God to quicken new life for all God’s beloved children.

¹⁵ Raimon Panikkar, *The Experience of God: Icons of the Mystery* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 81.

In the context of religious plurality, this means that there are kingdom agents alongside and often prior to church missionaries. Mission-shaped church suggests that the church is open to being infiltrated and animated by all human missionary activity as it offers itself to participate in God’s mission to usher in new life in the world, through love and in blessed communion. Boff’s words are fitting: “The missionary [church] always comes late: the Holy Trinity has already arrived, ever revealing itself in the awareness, the history, the societies, the deeds, and the destiny of peoples.”¹⁶ Of course, such openness to being formed and informed by the working of the Trinitarian God is not only an abstraction. There are bodies and spirits that represent such agents that are also [co]missioned by the dynamic love leading toward new life nurtured and nourished by communion with the Triune God. These agents too are sent out in kingdom-power and with kinship-spirit. At times, they receive the church on its arrival to be about the work of Christian mission. At other times, they confront the church through its settlement to get back to the mission of life inspired by love overflowing from being in communion with God. Clare Amos lends mission consequence to such a theological vision, which affirms faith in “a God whose very nature demands that we expand our openness toward the other.” Such openness to ethnic, cultural and religious others, she insists, stems from God’s own Trinitarian hospitality. Christians are thus called and sent out to be bearers of the gift of “divine hospitality,”¹⁷ which always involves both being receptors and givers of hospitality in interreligious love of each other and for the life of the world.

Multi-religiously informed, cruciform in life and witness, and transforming of death into organisms of life

¹⁶ Leonardo Boff, *New Evangelization: Good News to the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 70.

¹⁷ Clare Amos, “Foreword” in Fadi Daou and Nayla Tabbara, *Divine Hospitality: A Christian-Muslim Conversation* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publication, 2017), vii.

But all this language of openness veils an inevitable and truthful partial [en]closure. Jesus, even if not alone since in the company of the other movements of the Trinity, is, for the church, the embodiment of God. The openness to the working of the always-already movement of the Triune God, we might say, needs to be held in correlation with the concrete affirmation of being embraced in the gift of Jesus Christ and being accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit. A mission-shaped church is compassionately inclusive to co-missioners that are affected by the overflowing of this divine energy of life, love and communion. And yet a mission-shaped church is also passionately committed to effectively circulating the concrete gift that has been bestowed upon it through this divine overflow. It is in the figure of Jesus as the Christ and power of the Spirit that the church can be open to God and to the world. The concrete theological movement and property of Jesus Christ set loose by the power of the Spirit determines the contours of this openness, almost as if it reflects a limited [en]closure. I employ the terminology of [en]closure to foreground traces of life and love that emerges from the existence, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. A phrase almost in the form of a *koan* results: all openness to the Trinity is *half closed* in Jesus the Christ; yet all closeness within “Jesus alone” is ushered into *half openness* for abundant life within a spacious God. This hints at my next comment on being church in our context of world religions: the mission-shaped church is constrained by and in conformity with the cruciform life, teaching and praxis of Jesus that is operational in the world by the life-giving power of the Spirit.

The challenge of being a mission-shaped church in our 21st century context, where religions are coming together in geographical proximity but there is a growing rise of religious fundamentalism, has to do with mediating between our partial openness to accepting religious others as co-missioners and formulating our own mission invitation

as a fruitful and honest partial [en]closure. I have already extolled the virtues of missiological openness by a brief commentary on the theological capaciousness of the divine Trinity. But it is also crucial to extract some benefits from the specificity of the Christian invitation to all the children of God in the world. I do this by circumscribing the Christian particularity of the mission of God within the chosen placement of Jesus the Christ among the oppressed peoples of the world as the inconsequential Other and the promising power of the Spirit to transform such situations of impending death into resurrected instances of life.

The church, by submitting to being shaped by the cruciform life, teaching and praxis of Jesus, and set in motion in the world by the life-giving power of the Spirit, attests to its vocation. “The mad logic of the Trinity”¹⁸ is not allowed to remain intangible and abstract so that it becomes the smoke screen for the powerful, strong and vested power brokers of the world to peddle illusion rather than hope to the poor and the sinner, delusion rather than wholeness to the weak and the sick, and pathological servitude rather than therapeutic liberation to the oppressed and forsaken. Mission-shaped church cannot but also be faithful to its call to proclaim, live and promote the Gospel of Jesus Christ expressed by its cruciform shape. Emphasizing the fluidity, capaciousness and generosity of the divine trification without a reclamation of the concreteness, specificity and prophetic criticism of the suffering-liberating incarnate Jesus Christ leads to a mission that is not informed and formed by its Lord.

The life and witness of Jesus as divine self-giving among “the crucified people” eventually finds its way to the cross. In Jesus Christ we see a presence, a message and a

medium of compassionate self-giving that seeks to bring actual freedom, liberation and wholeness among concrete others that were rejected, crushed and broken. He goes out and encounters and mediates social, economic and religious otherness with purposive love to spawn new life. Rather than moving away from and separating from such others Jesus draws closer and relates more meaningfully with them as he offers them fullness of life. This also involved learning from others that were not thought of as having elements of knowledge and truth by the religiously learned of his day: children, women, gentiles, sinners, Samaritans, the poor and the victims of strong religion. Jesus’ mission thus involves a relocation with the least and the lost in the world.

The site of God’s mission in the specificity of the Jesus Way animated by the power of the Holy Spirit is not the hub of safety but the margins of erasure. Jesus comes to bring close at hand the workings of God for the fragmented and the dispossessed of the world rather than for the secure and the self-assured wellbeing of the church.

When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Mark 2:16-17).

In many gospel narratives Jesus must be followed outside of the gates to keep apace with his path. The cross, which we are asked to take up in order to follow Jesus in the end, is pitched outside the city of Jerusalem. Accepting Jesus thus also means being willing to travel with him on to the hill far away where he was glorified on an old rugged cross. The partial [en]closure of cruciform mission implies a peculiar opening to a special collective of people pushed to a unique location. The crushed of the world and the ones broken by the regimes of the world, including religion, are the object of Jesus’ life giving and love sharing; they are

¹⁸ “But there was a young lad who had been captivated. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo’s first son. It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow...” Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London Penguin Books, 1994), 147.

restored in love to life into deep communion within God's habitation.

This same mission of animating new life through self-expending love is extended through the power of the Spirit. The church takes its shape in conformity to this mission of Jesus and in continuity with this mission of the Spirit. Mission along this continuum is all about drawing close to the constituencies of death as exemplified by Jesus and claiming these as possible recipients for new life as inspired by the Spirit. This is the life force that animates the church into being mission affected and mission effective. And because of the power of cruciform love working toward new life in the world God's mission will prevail until the kingdom of God comes to the whole earth just as it is in heaven. Moltmann says this better. So let me quote a passage that has influenced this perspective:¹⁹

The mission of Jesus and the mission of the Spirit are nothing other than movements of life: movements of healing, of liberation, of righteousness and justice. Jesus didn't bring a new religion into the world. What he brought was new life. The goal isn't the establishment of any rule, not even a moral or religious one. The goal is "new creation of all things," "the greening of creation." The eternal life which God's Spirit creates is not another life following this one. It is the power through which this life here becomes different... So Christian mission isn't concerned about Christianity; its concern is the life of men and women. And the Church's mission isn't concerned about the church; its concern is the kingdom of God. And evangelization isn't concerned about spreading the doctrine of faith; its concern is the life of the world.

Conclusion

As Christians, we are invited to respectfully, compassionately, dialogically and cooperatively join with other kingdom agents to enhance new life in our common and plural world. At the same time, we are also moved to courageously, courteously,

coherently and passionately witness to the power of the gospel as we have experienced it concretely through the gift of new life in Jesus Christ and the Spirit. There is not an option to favour either one or the other. Both functions of the church are needed to benefit love-inspired new life formations for the transformation of the whole of God's world. A mediation between the broader framework, which recognizes the always-already outpouring of life, love and communion from the Triune God, and the more concrete configuration, which celebrates the cruciform Jesus-way operational in the world by the life-giving activity of the Spirit, provides us with productive ways to compassionately engage with the plurality of world religions and still passionately proclaim the Christian gospel.

The way forward for being a mission-shaped church in today's context of world religions would be to interpret Christian embassy as liberational solidarity as manifest by Jesus with crucified communities (victimized by the political, economic and religious elite) and to interpret interreligious hospitality as abundant generosity captured in the words of Abdel Kader (1808-83) when he says, "God is the God of All; and so we must love this All."²⁰ Let me end by making my point using an analogy of a community feast. Participating in the banquet of new life celebrated within the boundless communion of the differentially-graced human family by selfishly eating one's own delicacies in the supposition that everyone is only entitled to one's own cuisine is like bringing a sealed food basket, with a key tied to the owner's keychain, to a clan picnic. Conversely, coming to such a banquet solely with the purpose of feeding the diverse multitude with only one's own finest food is like bringing choicest beef steak, along with its complementary red wine, to a feast for vegetarians and teetotalers. The festive truth that animates the mission-shaped church in a context of religious plurality involves the blending of boundless divine hospitality with

¹⁹ Jurgen Moltmann, Mission of the The Spirit – The Gospel of Life" in *Mission – An Invitation to God's Future*, ed. Timothy Yates (Calver, Derbyshire: Cliff College Publications, 2000), 30-31.

²⁰ Abdel Kader's quote taken from Fadi Daou and Nayla Tabbara, *Divine Hospitality*, 148.

the embassy embodied by Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

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Towards an Integrated World

Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar

The following speech was given in commemoration of the 70th Anniversary of the Bossey Ecumenical Institute in Geneva, Switzerland. It is also the first of four, included here, from the first round of bilateral dialogues between the Muslim Council of Elders at Al-Azhar and the World Council of Churches, hosted by the WCC in Geneva, Switzerland in October 2016.

In the name of Allah the Merciful

Dr Agnes Abuom, Moderator of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC),

Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, WCC general secretary,

Ladies and gentlemen,

May peace and the blessing of Allah be upon you.

I am glad to welcome you, having just used this expression, which conveys love, brotherhood and peace, and to present to you, in my name and on behalf of the delegation of Al-Azhar Al-Sharif and the Muslim Council of Elders, my warmest compliments, thanking you for your kind invitation to attend this historic and unprecedented meeting. I hope that we will achieve our goals with practical results, enabling us to follow our path as believers from different parts of the world, so that we may realize the hope of humanity, in overcoming those obstacles to civilization which could take us back to an era of darkness, ignorance and the law of the jungle.

The WCC is to be commended for inviting us to this important meeting, with the presence of eminent scholars and religious leaders representing the monotheistic religions, meeting in the heart of Europe, in the beautiful and peaceful city of Geneva, so

that we may assume our responsibilities both to our conscience and to the message of Allah the Almighty. In this way, may we contribute to the revival of hope in the hearts of millions of people living in fear and distress and restore happiness to the faces of those in despair, orphans and widows, who regrettably become victims of armed conflicts imposed on them.

No doubt, the world nowadays is in need of your wisdom and your intervention more than ever before to reduce the suffering of people.

Many world statistics reveal the huge amounts of money allocated to the arms race, causing people suffering from poverty to contribute these amounts to the economies of big countries, carelessly ignoring the suffering and weeping of women and children.

We are also facing unjust policies that do not heed the destiny of poor and miserable people, causing disruption in society, exploiting resources, and taking away freedom of choice. These unjust policies are gambling with the present and future, using openly new philosophies and theories such as the “Clash of Civilizations,” the “end of history” and “creative chaos”—all fabricated modern theories reminding us of those used by the occupying powers in the last century to convince themselves and the occupied peoples that occupation is not a form of domination and imperialism but a message of civilization and modernization brought by the white man in order to save his Semitic brother from poverty, ignorance and disease.

We thought that the leaders of the free world and the defenders of liberty, global peace and human rights would never permit the confiscation of the fundamental right to live in freedom, justice and peace,

particularly after the creation of the UN in the wake of the Second World War. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares that the UN Charter will save humanity from suffering, protect their human rights, and provide them with welfare and progress. The first article in this charter called for the protection of world peace and security and the implementation of the principles of justice and equality among the member states, banning the use of force and violence or even the use of menace as well as the interference in “local affairs of states.” No one of my generation would have thought that this international charter—with its commitment to protect the oppressed and to combat the oppressors—would become a mere piece of paper unable to be implemented in relation to developing countries in the African continent and in both Arab and Islamic worlds. In fact, these commitments, which were presented and introduced with great hope for the oppressed peoples, are now, after nearly 70 years, no longer capable of fulfilling its obligations to combat injustice. Though the United Nations Charter was signed 68 years ago, it committed itself to combating all the different threats against world peace, putting an end to military aggression among nations, and imposing stability and peace worldwide. Unfortunately, the states empowered to safeguard the UN charter give peace to parties of their choice on the basis of their interests and the logic of hegemony and dictatorship which constitutes a new “logic of partiality” based on the immoral principle of “the end justifies the means.”

I am sure that you agree with me, ladies and gentlemen, that the real plague is the issue of peace worldwide that is wrongly linked with the interests of some states estranged from the firm moral and spiritual principles called upon by all monotheistic religions. “And this is the main difference between the philosophy of the divine messages ensuring cohabitation in peace and the deceptive meaning of ‘peace’ in the context

of modern policies leading to conflicts and wars.”

Ladies and gentlemen, I will not repeat all that is mentioned in the holy books about the concept of peace and its central role in the equilibrium of the whole planet, including mankind, animals, plants and indeed all things. The word “peace” is repeated many times in diverse contexts in the Old and New Testament and in the holy Qur’an. All the messengers and prophets were sent with a message of peace, love and fraternity. All the divine messages are based on the idea of enshrining peace among individuals and tribes. Allah warns the transgressors with severe sanctions, so that throughout history all empires that used oppression, injustice and brutality as a policy in order to rule have ultimately collapsed and lost everything. In fact, humankind is the creation of Allah, we are God’s children and in this context, our prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings upon him) said, “Human beings are God’s children and he who takes care of them surely is the most beloved to God.”

Allah the Almighty defends his believers—though I know that such expressions, nowadays, make no sense to many people, particularly young people living in the West and also some young people in the Orient, because they are far away from the message of Allah, have forgotten the moral principles of religions and have even become influenced by the messages of derision and sarcasm encouraged by atheists and their advocates simply because they have a feeling of hatred against religions. This group of people is rejecting God’s precepts, thus entering in an alliance with Satan to serve moral decay and wickedness. We must, as believers and messengers of peace and love among individuals and peoples, combat these evildoers, their message of hatred, and their misuse of religion to spread terror and violence, and we must together strongly fight terrorism across the whole world.

Ladies and gentlemen, we need to take up once more the philosophy of the religions,

with its rich principles defending peaceful coexistence and shared security among the peoples, recognizing that our modern age has suffered a lot by adopting worldly principles, thinking that these principles can be sufficient. And even if these worldly principles can realize modernity—technological and scientific development—they failed to grant humankind security, stability and peace. I will not remind you the chaotic results of the two world wars and the death of more than 70 million victims during a period of less than three decades.

In fact, these two wars were not caused by religion or by moral religious precepts. Indeed, the religions and their believers suffered a lot from the effects of these wars, from oppression and ill-treatment.

Humanity has experienced different political, economic and social regimes that have led to the happiness of a limited category of individuals at great cost to the majority of people living in extreme poverty. But these regimes did not grant to humanity stability and coexistence among the peoples; and what is noticeable here in Switzerland through the eyes of the elders of the West, is that this minority is controlling the world economy, monopolizing its markets, imposing “new forms of spoliation and plundering the resources of poor countries, pushing many companies and pension funds to bankruptcy and ruin ... and the firing of thousands of workers.” This means, as explained by the eminent religious scholar Hans Küng in the *New York Times Magazine*, that “the principle of supply and demand does not lead necessarily to balance and that market philosophy can never replace ethics.” He rejoices to hear the voices of people in the USA warning of the mounting policy of egoism and selfishness and the greed of a rich minority.

We need to ask the following question: What will we expect from peoples living in poverty and whose destiny is put in the hands of world policymakers who ignore the notion of suffering, poverty, disease and illiteracy? We cannot forget, on the one

hand, the images of bloodshed, the abject situations of distress of orphans and oppressed people fleeing in the desert with no shelter or food and, on the other hand, the images of those living in extravagance and luxury in their ivory towers.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In this world, witnessing the suffering of people worldwide, I recognize the importance of this meeting with you and the necessity of assuming our responsibility to reduce the suffering of humanity with a hope that we will take together the right path with individuals of good will and strong faith. The Al-Azhar Institute [delegation] has come to Geneva, bringing with it the focus on the important issue of peace and presenting this to the WCC in order to discuss the issue in the framework of this high-level meeting, gathering both elders and scholars from the Al-Azhar and from the WCC. This meeting, with our Christian brothers and sisters, is the third one: last year, we met with the Church of England with a group of eminent scholars and priests under the chairmanship of the Archbishop of Canterbury. A second meeting took place this year with Pope Francis at the Vatican. After these two meetings, the Al-Azhar called for the convening of an international conference on peace in Abu-Dhabi (UAE) next year, with the will of Allah, as well as a peace conference in Egypt in the middle of next year, with the presence of the Pope, and I am glad to invite the WCC to participate in these two conferences. I hope that young people from the WCC will have an effective participation in your official delegation. Truly speaking, the last visit of the WCC youth delegation to the Al-Azhar from 18-22 August 2016 was a success and left a good impression on Al-Azhar’s students in Cairo and a good echo in the Egyptian and world media as well as the social media network. I was glad to hear from this delegation of youth its willingness and enthusiasm to participate—within the capacity of the young people—in Islamic

projects, advocating for a message of love instead of hatred.

Dear daughters and sons, young people,

Please do not let your minds and thoughts accept those false messages that link Islam with terrorism; you are best at understanding that religion and violence are inconsistent. I do not have any doubt that you all admit that all religious messages have one unique aim, which is the happiness of humankind and to avoid falling into tragedy and disbelief. I am underlining the fact that religious armed groups advocating religious messages are in reality betraying their religions and their souls; that using religious messages in order to perpetrate crimes, slaughter and destruction is to be seen as unacceptable and reprehensible. All of you know that the horrible and abject deeds perpetrated in the past in the name of Christianity, using a false interpretation of the holy books, and causing the killing of many Muslims can never be linked to Christianity, and no Muslim has ever accused this religion of all that happened.

I am reiterating from this forum my firm position: that all these forms of terrorism with their different names and slogans are rejected by Islam and we have to find the real roots of terrorism outside the context of the holy Qur'an and the precepts of Islam; otherwise the approach will be an aberration of sound logical reasoning. The parties that are promoting these false accusations need to find the real causes of terrorism that are linked, as mentioned before, in biased policies and double standards as well as the greed of a minority defending its international and regional interests through the arms race and flourishing arms markets, forgetting the divine message of all religions and instead using mockery against God's prophets, books and messengers.

Peace and the blessings of Allah be upon all of you.

Towards an Integrated World

Agnès Abuom, Moderator, WCC Central Committee

Your Eminence Professor Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam and Sheikh Al-Azhar,

The esteemed delegation,

Peace to You All!

I appreciate the title that has been given to our dialogue: “Towards an Integrated World.” I appreciate it for various reasons related to climate change, social justice, poverty, racism and gender violence, because it is an important reminder both that we cannot make simplistic divisions, such as between east and west, and because it reminds us that events, actions, movements in certain parts of the world affect and are affected by what happens in other regions. This is what we mean by globalization.

So I am speaking to you as a Christian lay woman from East Africa, specifically from Kenya, but I am very conscious that what is taking place in Kenya is profoundly influenced both by the dynamics of the rest of Africa, and by developments that are taking place outside our continent.

Until fairly recently, Kenya was considered a beacon of interreligious harmony. It had and has other problems—but in terms of Christians and Muslims living together, it was seen as a positive model by many other countries. Although there were Al Qaeda suicide bombings attacking the US Embassy in 1998, this was seen primarily in terms of the world outside Kenya playing out its problems in our country. Clearly, this changed with the dramatic events of three years ago—the siege of the Westgate shopping mall brought Kenya into the unwelcome realization that religiously motivated domestic violence had arrived in the country. That has been reinforced by the dreadful attack on Garissa University College and regular incursions linked to the

group called Al Shabaab. Such atrocities have now led to the plan to building of a wall in the north of Kenya.

The reality is that the relationships between the Christian and Muslim communities in Kenya were already strained. The demography of Kenya—with the Muslim community comprising about 20 to 30 per cent of the population, and particularly concentrated along the coast and in the north-east—meant that with some justification the Kenyan Muslim community could feel that Islam and the Muslim community were marginalized within Kenyan national culture. Muslim regions of Kenya are among the poorest and least developed areas of the nation, and many Muslim leaders see this disparity as a result of the corruption and injustice of the government in Nairobi that is led predominantly by Christians.

It is interesting to see how all this is reinforced by perceptions that each community has of the other. Such perceptions have been built up over a considerable period of time and are influenced by the mutual history of our two communities. Many Kenyan Christians consider that the coastal Muslim community in particular is somehow not really Kenyan, they are depicted as “Arabs” – a perception that is in fact reinforced by school textbooks. Christians also tend to emphasize their own role in the independence struggle, and as the architects of modern Kenya. On the other hand, Muslims speak about their long history of urban development and civilization along Kenya’s coast, sometimes implying that the ancestors of modern Kenyan Christians were uncivilized, living in the jungle. Muslims also frequently refer to Christianity as a European religion, the religion of the colonizers. Islam is, therefore, portrayed as the agent of Kenyan civilization, while Kenyan Christians are

portrayed as following in the way of their former colonial masters. Each community portrays itself as the true founder of Kenya and depicts the other as essentially “foreign” to the nation.

These notions too often are reinforced by the actions of the government of the day, and the government is frequently accused by the Muslim community of favouring Christians. For example, the paperwork required to establish Kenyan citizenship has been found to be considerably more demanding for Muslims than for Christians. A particular issue, which has dominated civic life in the last decade, has been the question of the status of qadi courts—Muslim religious courts which can decide matters of personal status, marriage, divorce or inheritance when all parties profess the Muslim faith. Although, as a woman, I might want to question whether under such a legal system my rights would be entirely equal to those of a man, nonetheless I have to acknowledge that such courts have been part of Kenya’s constitutional fabric since independence. Indeed, these courts were given their role specifically to encourage the Muslim-dominated coastal regions to agree to become part of Kenya. One of the unfortunate realities is that in discussions about constitutional amendments in Kenya, some Christian leaders have misrepresented the situation regarding such courts, seeking to claim that they are an innovation being forced on the population, rather than acknowledging their role throughout the history of independent Kenya.

The growth of a certain illiterate radicalism and fundamentalism is a feature of life in recent years in both the Christian and the Muslim communities in Kenya. It is a tragic truth that the Westgate attack three years ago seems to have proved to be an effective recruiting campaign for al-Shabaab. Thousands of Kenyan Muslims have joined the militant group. This response must surely reflect the sense of alienation and exclusion that segments of the Muslim community feel vis-à-vis Kenyan society and political culture. However, radicalization is

not only a problem of Muslims. A comment by Wambugu Nyambura, a Kenyan security expert at Leeds University in England, is telling: “There is Christian fundamentalism taking root in Kenya, and this is contributing to the dynamics of religious intolerance in the country, and so we have to look at things collectively because it seems to me that someone is trying very hard to start a religious war in this country.”

The growth of neo-Pentecostalism among the Christian community in Kenya, and other parts of Africa, is a factor that has contributed to the increased sense of mutual hostility between Christians and Muslims. Neo-Pentecostal magazines, which can easily be found in Nairobi, often contain testimonies of conversions to Christianity which link Islam with evil spirits. Correspondingly, the practice of confrontational street preaching in Kenyan Islam, what is known as *mihadhara*, has provided a context in which Muslim speakers try to discredit Christian scriptures, often reinterpreting such scriptures to support their own views.

What both phenomena suggest to me is that the religious leadership, both Christian and Muslim, needs to be more courageous than it hitherto has been. Without directly supporting attacks on the other religion, there have been some occasions when religious leaders have given a sort of silent approval to what their followers are saying and doing.

But another essential element for a genuinely peaceful future for the people of Kenya is that religious leaders must foster the importance of learning, and in particular, learning about the other. One of the jewels and fruits of the Christian ecumenical movement in Africa is the existence of PROCMURA—the Programme for Christian Muslim Relations in Africa. Although this deeply respected programme is Africa-wide in its scope, it is no accident that it has its main base in Kenya. For over 50 years, it has been seeking to encourage Christians to learn more about their Muslim

neighbours, and on many occasions it has offered a platform for those involved in conflict to engage positively with each other. Another very different but equally important programme is the Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations in Eastleigh, which is a slum area of Nairobi. This programme is supported by St Paul's Christian University of Limuru. It seeks to make a difference in a context in which, because of poverty and illiteracy, religious fundamentalism and its associated tendencies towards violence are prone to develop and flourish. The recent work by young Muslim scholars is brave in assisting youth to resist radicalization.

What is the message from Kenya to this important meeting for dialogue and peace-building?

First, that integration in our world can work negatively or positively. We in Kenya cannot be unaffected by struggles and tensions beyond our borders. Conceivably, however,

we also are able to offer positive stories that influence the wider world.

Secondly, that positive integration and questions of identity are inevitably interwoven. For many people in Kenya, there is clearly a link between religious and national identity. What it means to be either a Christian or a Muslim and a Kenyan needs teasing out and must be worked on constructively by Christian and the Muslim leadership.

And thirdly, that issues of religion and violence cannot be considered in isolation from economic, environmental and educational issues. Religion is affected by poverty, deprivation and—above all—illiteracy.

If we want to work for an integrated world, we need to do so with a holistic vision that takes account of all these factors.

The Responsibility of Religious Leaders for Achieving World Peace

Gennadios of Sassima, Vice-Moderator, WCC Central Committee

We are living today in a very special situation, in tragic, even discouraging circumstances, looking at the situation in our world. Violence, wars, injustice and fear as well as acts of terrorism are rooted in the lives of our peoples. Therefore, each day we are confronted with the reality that peace is still absent, that poverty as well is growing, and that the suffering of our humanity is still touching people's lives. We are asking ourselves: What sometimes is the relationship of our Christian faith to the violence we see in the world? How do we respond to violence in a manner that is rooted in our faith and our relationship to God? In this relationship with a God of peace and justice, how do we experience peace and justice in our own lives and labour so that they may be realized in the lives of others, in our communities, and in our world?

These are some of the questions addressed by numerous historians, theologians, sociologists and politicians as well by people from different Christian traditions and other religious faiths.

In an increasingly complex and violent world, various religions, Christianity and Islam in particular, have come together to recognize, along with other religious communities and living faiths, that working for peace today constitutes a primary expression of their responsibility for the life of the world. This responsibility, which is grounded in the essential goodness of all human beings and of all that our common God the Creator has created, continues to sustain us, and is leading us towards unity and a greater future. For all, peace is inextricably related to the notion of justice and freedom that the Creator has granted to all human beings through the creation as a gift and vocation. Peace and peacemaking

are a gift and vocation to provide opportunities to connect our ethical witness and faith with social transformation and renewal. The dynamic nature of peace as gift and vocation does not allow its identification with stagnation, passivity and the acceptance of injustice.

Today, the role of religions in the contemporary world's circumstances requires the transcendence of all morbid manifestations of religious fanaticism and intolerance of the past, which are alien to their spiritual mission and have heaped many woes on humanity. What is required, as well is the full support of peace, social justice and human rights, which are called for in the teachings of all religions and which to a greater or lesser extent constitute a common basis for their constructive dialogue with contemporary political ideology as regards the relations between human beings and between peoples.

The independent discourse of religions in their relations with the communities of their adherents, which confirms the historical endurance of their spiritual relationship with society, is capable of credibly promoting both the needfulness of the vision of peace, that the world may live, and the arduous path for experiencing this vision upon which the modern person, thirsting for freedom, peace and justice, will have to embark.

We all also acknowledge that religions have, in the past, occasionally been abused in the service of national, political and religious interests which are foreign to their spiritual mission. In the name of religions, and in deviation from their teachings, crimes and atrocities have been perpetrated against innocent people. Therefore, we expressly and categorically repudiate all violence, terrorism or criminal action carried out

ostensibly in the name of religion, thus reasserting our interreligious declaration that “all crimes perpetrated in the name of religion are crimes against religion itself.”

Indeed, we launch an appeal to the spiritual leaders of all religions to undertake the necessary work and to cooperate in achieving the defusing of these perilous confusions, in order thereby to achieve the truly credible furtherance of God’s will that peace, social justice and respect for fundamental human rights will prevail.

We also launch an appeal to political and intellectual leaders of all peoples and international bodies to avail themselves of the opportunity to make use of the institutional role of religion in a positive manner, in order to achieve the peaceful resolution of local, regional and more general conflicts, and to realize an ambitious plan for education towards peace, in order to remedy the prepossessions and painful experiences of the past. We also urge that the cooperation of all contemporary mass media be secured for this plan to achieve the widest possible outreach.

We reassert our unwavering resolve to continue with our constructive interreligious dialogues both to achieve a spirit of mutual understanding and sincere cooperation, and to promote such a spirit in the practical affairs of our contemporary multicultural societies. Therefore, we give our full support to all interreligious and intercultural initiatives that are guided by such a spirit.

Our task today is to strengthen the role of peace, dialogue and tolerance in the development of peaceful co-existence between Christians and people of other respective religions, Muslim and non-Muslim peoples in particular. Some Western concepts of national identity connect tolerance with submission to the values of a majority. But, “Tolerance does not mean being influenced by others or joining them; it means accepting others as they are and knowing how to get along with them.” Dialogue diminishes our disagreements with

one another. Such dialogue always aims to develop a new dual identity: one which is connected with religious identity and the other which reflects membership in a secular nation.

The role of interfaith dialogue is to develop tolerance and a common secular identity with respect to religious identity. A dialogue must involve the participants in a discussion of the values, needs and traditions of each religious group as well as the possibilities for the creation of a common identity concept that would satisfy and respect the values and needs of all religious groups.

We may also think that these existing conflicts of today hardly affect us because we live so far away, but they do. However, in spite of these polarizing trends, God wants us to stand in the gap and be peacemakers. In fact, this situation affords us an opportunity to share the Good News of peace, as it is written in Prophet Isaiah, “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings...” (Isaiah 52:7). Nowadays, people are feeling a deep need for peace, which serves as a reminder that we should take this peace message wherever we go.

Your Eminence and distinguished Sisters and Brothers,

Since God loves peace, it is not surprising to find this topic frequently mentioned in the writings of the Prophets, especially with regard to God’s plans to bring peace to this troubled world. Meanwhile, the topic of peace is intuitively appealing so let us not be timid or to afraid to engage people in talking about it. This is also true of Muslims, who believe that their religion is peaceful.

The dynamics of an interfaith encounter between Muslims and Christians differ because of their historic relationships as well as their major theological, social and political differences. Contemporary initiatives in Muslim-Christian dialogue can be better understood in a larger context,

here established by a brief overview of dominant themes in Muslim-Christian encounters.

The world needs peace, justice and reconciliation for the benefit of the dignity of humankind, independent of its religious background, culture, race, color and national identity.

How we can live alongside each other in spite of our differences? It is true that we differ from each other and we experience this difference in our daily lives in many parts of the world.

However, we are united in God's creation, where each of us has a place and role to play. How can we deny the love of God, who created this world for us? We need each other to share the experience of human values, whereby we can find common platforms of understanding on many issues and upon which the centre and focus is the "man" (anthropos), humankind.

How can we live in complete isolation, which brings us to death? Dialogue is needed to open our hearts and minds, and to see each other face-to-face with respect and dignity, without barriers and prejudices. It is the time to stop any actions of violence, terrorist actions, and conflicts and wars, and

to establish peaceful bridges for reconciliation to overcome the painful hostilities of the past.

Today, we are also facing the tragic phenomenon of refugees who struggle for a better future for their lives and families.

But in order to do so, we need to live in a complete freedom, a freedom in which each of us can live in equal rights, not with special rights, because we are all members of the "global house" of God, offered by His love and grace to all of humanity.

We need strong voices which can speak openly with honesty and respect to those who still remain indifferent or to those who still need a *modus vivendi* in order to be mobilized for a constructive dialogue of friendship and in a spirit of togetherness and human fellowship.

Finally, dialogue also represents a new and major effort to understand and cooperate with others in increasingly interdependent and religiously diverse countries. The newness of dialogue and the absence of conceptual clarity have required experimentation. Issues about planning, organization, representation and topics to be engaged need careful consideration and collaboration in the future.

Towards an Integrated World

Martin Junge, General Secretary, Lutheran World Federation

Your eminences, your excellencies, distinguished dialogue partners,

Let me first of all express my joy about this moment of discussion and dialogue across religions, in order to address an issue that is a concern to the whole human family: peace.

I want to acknowledge the presence of our dialogue partners from the al-Azhar and the Muslim Council of Elders, led by the Grand Imam, Professor Ahmad Al-Tayyeb. Your outreach and your determination to come with your delegation to the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva to sit with us and discuss peace is a great encouragement.

We are able to sit together here, because we recognize each other as representatives of religions which, while different in several aspects, are unanimous in their focus on peace. Peace is at the heart of our respective religious traditions, because peace is God's vision for all humanity. That's why our traditions speak and should also speak about peace.

Already the fact that our respective sacred texts make such an emphasis on peace, calling believers over and over again to peaceful lives, reveals at the same time a reality, which through the eyes of faith we can't but humbly acknowledge: the message of peace reaches human beings that carry within themselves the potential for conflict, and that under specific circumstances this inclination expresses itself in violence.

As it is not fair to say that specific religions have the monopoly over peace and others over violence, it won't be fair either to say that there is any believer, in any of the many religious traditions, that wouldn't fall under this ambivalence of human nature: capable of the most beautiful expressions of art and beauty, of love and care, and yet also capable of the most abhorrent violence, hatred and oppression. This ambivalence

characterizes Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Zoroastrians and you name it. Not because of their religious affiliation, but because of their human condition.

We seem to be living again in a period of human history when the pace of change, the volatility of structures and the pressure on individuals and communities seems to trigger conflict and violence. We live in times of fragmentation. Communities that in the past managed to live peacefully together struggle today. Political instruments like the UN, or regional structures like, for instance, the European Union struggle too. They have a hard time managing to work together. Hateful speeches are on the rise. Political leaders surrender to a "majority rule" which neglects the fundamental democratic principle of the protection of equal citizenship to all. And at times, communication even breaks down, isolating communities, drifting them away from each other in an irreversible journey of alienation.

Where does religion stand in all of this?

I think our being together here is an expression of the fact that we are unanimous in our resolve not to be derailed from our message of peace. I believe we are confident enough in the conviction that our respective religious traditions speak powerfully enough into our lives and our world so as to give us the basis and the strength to resist the trend of fragmentation, violence and communication breakdowns. I believe we understand our role today, which is to prophetically stand up against messages, attitudes and actions that counter God's intentions of peace for the entire humanity.

But what does it take, in practical terms, to offer this witness in our world? Let me offer some perspectives here:

1. Although this is not the first meeting to discuss peace and the role of religions to uplift and build peace in our world, and although I assume there will be many more to come, I'd still like to defend our coming together these two days as significant and meaningful. To remain in dialogue is, in itself, already a deliberate step to claim the vocation of peace of our religions, and to avoid being derailed into opposite attitudes.
2. Yet, we know as well that if such meetings do not give us direction in view of actions that need to follow, we will fall short, and will eventually generate frustration instead of encouragement among people looking up at their leaders for direction and for hope.
3. Here are what I see as some possible action lines:
 - a. Protect: in view of all the violence that is unfolding today, I believe there is a duty to protect human beings in volatile contexts from becoming prey to sectarian violence of any kind, including religiously motivated violence. I am convinced that ideas like the monitoring centre of violence recently established in Nigeria, involving both Christian and Muslim organizations, is a good example to be replicated.
 - b. Educate: we have a responsibility to educate our respective constituencies, particularly the religious leaders in our communities, towards awareness of extremism and how to guard against it, because there is no extremism which wouldn't attempt to make a given religion become its instrument. Here, I am particularly keen that we have the courage to identify within our own sacred texts those passages and references that have often been used to justify violence based on religious beliefs. I become nervous when interreligious dialogues exclusively emphasize the peace messages of various traditions without also admitting there are other texts, which can be interpreted to condone, if not instigate, violence, or which openly call for it. What will we do with those texts? What will we say to our preachers on Friday and Sunday in view of how to relate to these texts? We can't fight religious extremism without giving tools to our leaders to relate and interpret these texts. LWF has started working with Muslim scholars to go deeper into this question. I would love to see this initiative grow and become a larger conversation.
 - c. Serve: in 2014, religious leaders from around the world adopted the statement "Welcoming the Stranger." This statement, developed under the leadership of UNHCR, and with the involvement of many different religious traditions, came up with a common conviction, to be found in all religious traditions, that the stranger is to be protected. This document has become very important in Europe for us to commonly advocate for the protection of refugees. But it has also become an invitation to begin to work together for people in need. Not only is the word "peace" common to our two religious traditions, but the word "love" is common to us. LWF has worked together with Muslim organizations in Jordan, Kenya and Nepal to support people in need. That joint service—in my experience—carries the weight of ten statements in one. Is there space for more?
 - d. Support youth: I want to finish my presentation by referring to the importance of supporting youth. Yes, I believe we can help through teaching them to live in peace and harmony. They would do this anyway, if only they would see their elders living accordingly. But to me, the issue

goes deeper: we live in a time when the hopes and perspectives of young people are being systematically marginalized. I was glad to see, after visiting Dar Es Salaam four years ago, that when a church burned in a poor neighbourhood, Muslims and Christians came together and analyzed the problem. It boiled down to: poverty, a lack of perspectives and marginalization. It is this condition that makes communities, but also young generations, very vulnerable to

hate speech, mobilization and extremism. Young people need to have a perspective for their lives, so as to love their lives and the lives of others. Any teaching of youth that doesn't also come with the empowerment of youth will go only halfway.

Your eminences, your excellencies, distinguished discussion partners: It is good that we have come together to talk about peace. That's what we should do. And indeed, there is more we could do.

Conflict and Co-Existence

Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary, World Council of Churches

The following speech is the first of two, included here, from the second round of bilateral dialogues between the Muslim Council of Elders at Al-Azhar and the World Council of Churches, hosted at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt. The dialogue theme was "Conflict and Co-Existence."

27 April 2017
Cairo, Egypt

Sheikh Al-Azhar,

Your eminences, your excellencies,

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God" (Matthew 5:8). To make peace is holy work. Everyone who brings peace, real peace, just peace is serving the will of God. For religious leaders and for faithful at the grassroots it should therefore be our common agenda and our highest priority.

We are, therefore, as representatives of the World Council of Churches present here, very grateful to the Sheikh Al-Azhar and the Muslim Council of Elders for this opportunity to gather to affirm our common commitment to work for just peace in our world together.

We meet at a critical time for this country and for this region, and for many regions in the world, where there are signs of division and polarization in peoples and nations, and some are also dividing people according to their different faiths. We see this in many parts of the world. We see also that religious identity and references to religion are misused for this purpose, and are even used to legitimize violence and terror in the name of religion. This is not what our children need to live together in peace. This is not what will correspond to the aspirations and hopes of our youth.

We believe in one God that has created One humanity to live together with its diversity and differences. We are here to share our reflections and commitment to show together what we believe this means in practice. Together we should call for the care of the life of everybody created by God. We are accountable to the Creator when we meet one another as God's creation.

This is our personal responsibility, whoever we are and whatever position we have. As religious leaders, we have a special responsibility to elevate the sanctity of the life of all human beings created by the Holy God. As communities of faith we are called to show this as love to one another, in relations of respect and care to everybody.

We acknowledge that we all are vulnerable and that we all have equal needs for protection and for human rights. Authorities of states are responsible for providing the frameworks for this, so that we all are treated with equal rights and given the same responsibilities.

This corresponds in several ways to the concept of "citizenship". The principle of citizenship is, therefore, in my view, a proper way to express in the realm of politics something that is also important in our faith in God. The principle of citizenship belongs to the realm of politics and legal systems, but can provide the rights and the protection we need whoever we are and whatever faith community we belong to. Different people should have the same basis and security for their lives and for their children's lives, and for their grandchildren's lives. In the framework of a state and in the international community of states, we need principles that care for justice and peace for all. We need to give equal protection to all against injustices and violence. We need

something solid and clear as a common platform for our lives together.

In our discussions with Al-Azhar during the last couple of days we have seen that exactly the basic concept of citizenship is on our common table. We were discussing what it means for people of different religions to live constructively together as common citizens of the same country. This is, as we say, a very “live” issue in parts of the Middle East at the moment, and it is a concern where I respect the lead that the Sheikh Al-Azhar is seeking to give. It is however also an issue that many nations in the so-called Western world increasingly need to face, particularly in these days of widespread international migration. How can all citizens in every country both be respected for the particular and diverse contributions of religion or ethnicity they can offer to the rich fabric of the nation, as well as being fully integrated and enabled to live together with all as constructive citizens of the country? Such a challenge is one that cannot be ignored.

We should, furthermore, explore together how religion and the practices of our faith should contribute to life together in peace and harmony. We should demonstrate what it means to care for and protect one another. We should affirm one another that we need the love and the care, but even more, that we need to provide to one another the same rights to be citizens, to be neighbours, to be human beings with our basic human needs addressed for food, water, security, health, education, freedom to believe and to share our convictions with one another.

My friends, I think we have seen here in Egypt striking examples of what this means. We have heard of many examples that Muslims protect and defend Christians when they are victims of violence. We hear that Christians share their support of poor people or offer education to anybody, regardless their religion.

We need to find real expressions of how the love of God can be expressed in the love of one other. I am encouraged to learn from both Muslim and Christian leaders that we should explore further how this relationship with the divine love and our love can be expressed.

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever who does not love does not know God” (1 John 4:7-8). God calls us to share this love with one another and with the world.

This quest for a concretization of what our faith in the love of One God means is not an abstract question or a soft wish in a hard reality of life. This is indeed an urgent and basic question in a time when different groups and leaders want to use religion as a means to divide, or polarize, or even legitimize conflict and war.

Violence in the name of religion cannot be done without violating the values of religion. Violence in the name of God towards those who are created in the image of God becomes violence against God. We are from the beginning to the end accountable to God.

We have to take another way, a pilgrimage way, searching for justice and peace together with all who are willing to be on this way together. This is the only way that can give us a future of hope. This is the way of real dialogue.

I am also very glad that this conference has happened in such close proximity to the time of bilateral dialogue that we the World Council of Churches have been holding with the Muslim Council of Elders. I want to use this opportunity to express how the WCC regards our developing relationship with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar and the Muslim Council of Elders as important, and we look forward to working together in the future in practical ways to build peace in our world.

Being a World Council of Churches, a fellowship of 350 churches, representing

560 million members, we are based on an ongoing dialogue with one another. We are “seeing one another in the eye, to see what we have to say together” (the late Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras). We believe that as a fellowship of churches we have a call to be one, and we believe that we are called to show that being one also means promoting a just peace among the peoples, in the marketplaces, in the communities, with the creation.

As a *Council* of Churches we are in a responsible relationship to one another. We are accountable to what unites us in the basis for our Christian faith and life. This is the faith in One God, the creator of the One humanity, whom we worship as the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This call to be one is a call to the fellowship we are created to be in the one human family, with all our *gifts of diversity*. We are called to embrace the gifts of the others, which we can share as we are in council with one another.

There are differences that we have, some theological, some sociological but perhaps stemming out of our different religious traditions. These differences are important to us, and also we suspect to our dialogue partners of other faiths. We do not want to deny them or pretend that they do not exist. But they do not, and must not stop us working together for peace.

This call to be one in diversity we experience in a profound way being a *World Council of Churches*, with a global reach. We have the privilege of having within our membership churches in all parts of the world, including of course here in the Middle East and North Africa.

We share the truth about the love of God and the will of God, as we also search for the truth about the reality in which we live in our different contexts. The reality of the grace of God that we share is mixed with the reality of sin. This calls us to participate in the human family in solidarity with one

another, in humility and even with a critical and self-critical approach.

The WCC was established immediately after the World War II, this tragedy of humanity that became a disaster for nations and people, some of them suffering from some kind of Christian legitimization of their suffering, like the Jewish people. The churches realized in 1948 that they could also be part of oppression and contribute to conflict. It was time for repentance and reconciliation.

The same self-critical approach was necessary in the following years in the struggles following the de-colonization of many parts of the world. Again Christianity was linked to the tragic history of colonization and slavery, of racism and discrimination.

Today we again have to struggle against racism, exclusion of refugees, division and separation – still in the name of religion, even our Christian faith.

On the other side, by God’s grace, we have seen how being in dialogue and council with one another has called us to unity and to order, to repentance, to find other ways forward.

God has called us to Christian Solidarity in the Cross of Christ. Standing here in Cairo, I am moved and humbled by the witness of the faithful Christians who belong to our four member churches in this country. We honour their fidelity at this time which seems to be especially difficult and dangerous. With the paradox that is at the heart of our Christian faith we bear witness to the fact that in their apparent vulnerability there is great spiritual strength. In their daily lives they are somehow reflecting the mystery of the cross which is central to our faith.

We want to work together and with all human beings and communities of faith for the greater good of our world. This vision of diversity in unity is also a gift that we want to bring to the wider table of interreligious

cooperation, of men, women and children of many different religions working together for global peace with justice for all human beings, and indeed for the welfare of the earth itself.

Therefore, let me conclude: As religious leaders, gathered today for peace, we have the duty of speaking with one voice, particularly against any advocacy of hatred that amounts to inciting violence, discrimination or any other violation of the equal dignity that all human beings enjoy regardless of their religion, belief, gender, political or other opinion, national or social origin, or any other status.

We agree as human beings that we are accountable to all human beings as to redressing the manner by which religions are portrayed and too often manipulated. We are responsible for our actions but even more responsible if we do not act or do not act properly and timely. While states bear the primary responsibility for promoting and protecting all rights for all, individually and

collectively to enjoy a dignified life free from fear; we, as religious leaders do bear a distinct responsibility to stand up for our shared humanity and equal dignity of each human being. We should do it here together, and in our own spheres of preaching, teaching, spiritual guidance and social engagement.

We have a duty to speak in love and of love, to redress hate speech by remedial compassion and solidarity that heals hearts and societies alike. We as religious leaders must assume our respective roles. As believers and ordinary people of our faith communities we can make the real difference in the way we speak, in the way we teach our children, in the way we live together in the local communities and show what our faith means as expression of the love of God.

Together we make a difference. Together we can give hope. In love for the one humanity let us do it together.

Conflict and Co-Existence

Heidi Hadsell, President, Hartford Seminary

I will briefly discuss three ways leaders can promote citizenship and co-existence from a Christian perspective, one that is also influenced by my academic field of Christian Ethics, and by my many years as president of a seminary that has a large programme in the study of Islam and Muslim-Christian relations, and a student body that is 40% Muslim. I have grouped my thoughts under the categories of vision, values and virtues, and bridge building.

Vision

“Without vision the people perish.” Proverbs 29:18

Christians view human life in this world in part as preparation for the next, but life also is a gift from God to be enjoyed and embraced, and improved upon when and where it is necessary. This is to say that Christians understand human life in the light of and in response to God’s vision for humanity and all of creation. For many reasons, we often fail to live life according to God’s vision, and it is part of our task as Christians to see and understand the distance between life as we often live it and life as it should be lived as God intends. We are pulled forward, compelled to move ahead generation after generation, motivated in part by our awareness that part of our vocation is to help bring into being the various facets of God’s vision of the fullness of life for all of humanity and all of creation. This means that Christians can never let go of the vision of what could be and should be, in order to simply live in the world as it is given.

God’s vision of what should be in our human, social world has been described and understood in many ways. The moral nature of the vision includes: a shared sense of the dignity of every being; just relations within communities and between communities and peoples; and the recognition of the intrinsic

worth of every human being, so that all human beings are viewed as ends in themselves, created by God, and not as means to an end. Nature is also endowed with intrinsic worth, and its protection from our own human greed and carelessness is part of our human vocation.

The role of the leader in relation to God’s vision of the fullness of all of life is to lay out the vision and keep it before the people so that they see and understand both the vision and their own role as participants in its realization. The leader reminds people of God’s vision, calls them back to God’s vision, keeps the clarity of the vision before them, and shows the way towards the faithfulness of choices of institutions and people to the vision God lays before us. It is in relation to God’s vision of who we should be and how we should relate to others and to all of creation that people understand the meaning and purpose of the tasks of citizenship and life itself. It is also according to the understanding of God’s vision that the various tasks of building relationships of co-existence and friendship between communities are most meaningful both in and of themselves, and because they are contributing to the realization of God’s vision of the fullness of life for all of humanity and all of creation.

Values and Virtues

Religious leaders are critically important sources for guidance on the values and virtues that help shape human beings and guide our participation in human communities and the building of relationships between human communities.

Leaders serve others in part by helping them translate the content of faith into moral action guided by religious values. This translation of faith into values that guide life in concrete circumstances is not always easy

and Christians do not always agree on what living in the light of one's faith means in concrete moments and circumstances. Indeed, vigorous discussion is the norm. In general, the Christian tradition has a positive perspective on the role of governing institutions and authorities that give order and continuity to human social and economic life, and meaning to the concept of citizenship. Thus, order in society is generally considered far preferable to disorder and chaos, and responsible authority is considered preferable to anarchy. For some Christian traditions, order is so important that the duty of the Christian citizen is to obey the governing authorities, regardless of the ways they may misuse their authority. For other Christian traditions, the duty of the Christian citizen and Christian leaders to obey the governing authority is only valid until the authority requires obedience in ways that are antithetical to central Christian moral teachings. At this point, the duty of the Christian citizen shifts from that of obedience to authority and becomes one of disobedience of laws that Christians cannot in good conscience obey, or, when possible, participation in efforts to change those laws.

In the Reformed tradition, which is the tradition from which I come, and also in many traditions of Christianity, we remember in various ways and learn from the moments in history of the resistance of some of our leaders who spoke out against practices they identified as practices in which no Christian could engage with good conscience. We also remember those who, shaped by their faith, contributed greatly to the civic communities to which they belonged.

Religious leaders not only help with the complex and often difficult necessity of translating faith into action, and helping make abstract moral principles concrete as they are applied to life, they also act as moral models for their people. All religions have core moral virtues and expect their leaders to embody, exemplify and teach others to practice these moral virtues. Jesus

is of course, for Christians, the primary example of moral leadership through his teaching, but also and importantly through his character and the ways he exemplified moral virtues in the way he interacted with those around him and in facing many severe challenges and temptations. In this way, Jesus, like every good leader, teaches both by what he does and, equally as important, by who he is, which relates directly to the moral virtues he embodies.

While one can list many virtues Christians hold dear, the Christian tradition teaches that the greatest of the virtues are faith, hope and love. While these are virtues every Christian is meant to practice, they are also virtues especially important for religious leaders to embody as the essence of their leadership: being faithful in all they do, think and teach; demonstrating a hope that comes directly from the certainty of and trust in the sovereignty of God, even when circumstances of life do not seem hopeful; and showing love for God through love for humanity, both in general and in particular, for those they lead, and, especially in accordance with Christian teachings, the lowest and least among us.

Through the embodiment and practice of such virtues and the teaching of the values of the Christian faith, leaders help their followers not only be faithful Christians, but also take seriously the obligations and privileges of citizenship, for it is through service to others that one lives closest to who God intends us to be. And it is through love of the other that one reaches across boundaries that divide human communities and creates relationships of mutual respect and friendship.

Bridge-building

As the Qur'an so eloquently states in Surah #49, Verse 13: "God made you into nations and tribes so that ye could know each other."

As we read in Christian scripture, through his own concrete actions and teachings

Jesus encourages his followers over and over again to go beyond their own communities, beyond the human divisions of all kinds that were prevalent at the time, to build relationships of reciprocity and mutual respect with those on the other side, whether because of tribe, social status, disease, religion, political divisions or gender. This insistence on crossing the boundaries between and within human communities is one of Jesus's central themes, and he returns to it over and over again. The ability to lead a community of believers is, as Jesus demonstrates, not enough for faithful leadership. The leader must also be able to look beyond the barriers, beyond the borders, beyond the divisions between and within communities, and discern the shared humanity, the dignity, and the decency of those outside the community.

This crossing of boundaries and reaching out to the other is certainly one of the most difficult tasks of religious leadership. People in groups are often wary of those in other groups, and feel most comfortable staying within their own groups. Difference is, more often than not, something people fear, not something people think they can enjoy or learn from. When insecure, people are comforted by high fences and walls and are not eager for doors or windows. Communities seek and respond to leaders who reinforce their own sense of themselves as a group, and people often do not want to be challenged by their leaders to be in reciprocal, respectful relationships with people outside their group, community or comfort zone.

And yet, this capacity to cross borders and boundaries—especially the boundaries of religious communities—has surely been one of the most important attributes of leadership in the histories of our communities, and remains so today. For without the capacity to see commonalities in the other or cross boundaries to build relationship with the other, one cannot construct peaceful interactions and co-

existence between peoples of different communities.

People in religious communities often fear that crossing boundaries and relating appreciatively with those from other religious communities will somehow change their faith or dilute it in some way. It is the responsibility of religious leaders—many of whom have themselves had the opportunity to interact with and get to know other leaders from other communities—to help their own people see and understand that the crossing of boundaries in appropriate way (for friendship and cooperation with other communities) does not mean changing one's faith or diluting it, but rather living out one's faith, being faithful, and being true to one's faith in ways that God intends.

Just down the street from where I live is a big Congregational church. As one walks or drives by that church, one sees today a big sign in the front that says "We love and welcome and stand with our Muslim neighbours." One can see these signs or similar signs on the front of many churches in the United States today. These signs are protests against the new immigration policies of the USA government. But they are also, and importantly, an indication that the leaders in those congregations have done and are doing their best to help their members understand that this reaching out to Muslims or others is not a threat to their Christian faith, but an integral part of it. They reach out not in spite of their own Christian faith, but because of it.

I am president of a graduate school, Hartford Seminary, which has been a leader in Christian-Muslim relations for more than 100 years. And yet still today, our faculty and students, 40% of whom are Muslim, and I spend considerable time and energy helping the public understand that through interaction and study together our students do not become "less" Muslim or "less" Christian. Rather, we gain knowledge, and our appreciation of other faiths helps us become more knowledgeable about and

more deeply proud of our own faith traditions.

I think when our leaders interact and live in friendship with each other they can, and should, share experiences, encourage each

other and help each other be the best possible leaders they can be. While our faith traditions may be distinct and different, the qualities of a good religious leader remain very similar across our traditions.

En-Gendering Justice: Christians and Buddhists in Conversation on Religion, Gender and Power:

Identifying Issues and Challenges

Elizabeth J. Harris

I begin with two cameos.¹ The first occurred a couple of decades ago at a pan-Asia interfaith women's conference held in Sri Lanka. It drew women together from different religions from several Asian countries. I was also invited because, at that point, I was doing a doctorate in Buddhist Studies in Sri Lanka. One principle that was tacitly accepted in our conversations and presentations was that everyone present could be critical of the patriarchy within her own tradition and within others. In other words, all those who came for the entire conference recognized that the religions represented among the participants were not innocent when it came to patriarchy, gender discrimination and injustice against women. We also recognized that this patriarchy oppressed both men and women. However, one Buddhist woman from Sri Lanka, who joined us for a short time to give a presentation at my invitation, was not happy with this. In contrast to the other presentations, hers argued that Buddhism had an unblemished record when it came to empowering women and women's rights, and that this was observable both in texts and history. When she was challenged by some of the Christians and Jews present to be more critical of her own tradition, she reacted defensively and was visibly upset. She was simply not willing to admit that Buddhism might be guilty of gender discrimination. More significantly, she saw the questions as an unjustified and unkind attack on both herself and Buddhism.

My second cameo concerns a Western Buddhist nun ordained in the Tibetan

tradition and based in the USA. She lives in a context where some Western Buddhists do not place much importance on the Buddhist monastic tradition, believing that one can be a perfectly good *nirvāṇa*-orientated Buddhist without renouncing, shaving one's head and wearing the robes of a *bhikṣu* (Sanskrit: Buddhist monk with higher ordination) or a *bhikṣuṇī* (Sanskrit: Buddhist nun with higher ordination). She once said to me something like this, "In my situation, I often have more in common with nuns in the Christian tradition than with Western Buddhists of this kind. Christian nuns understand what the holy life is all about."

In the first cameo, the power relations of the conference were tilted against the Buddhist speaker. She came into a context, albeit a religiously plural one, where a code of conduct, informed by an awareness of patriarchy in religion, had already been established. She had not been party to this, although I had told her as much as I could about what kind of conference to expect. In contrast, she came with a completely different set of preconceptions, this time informed by the memory of the British colonial period in Sri Lanka (1796-1948), when a Buddhist revival had mounted a spirited defence against the contempt with which Christian evangelical missionaries viewed Buddhism. This contempt had been expressed in missionary writings about Buddhism and in the preaching carried out both in the open air and in Christian churches.² Not only did the missionaries accuse Buddhism of being nihilistic and

¹ Names and exact locations have been withheld from these cameos to protect the anonymity of the people concerned.

² See Elizabeth J. Harris, *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter: Religious, Missionary and Colonial Experience in Nineteenth Century Sri Lanka* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006).

irrational, but they also condemned the position of women within the religion. Wesleyan missionary Robert Spence Hardy, for instance, declared in 1864:

*“That which is named woman, is sin,” says Gotama. And again he tells us, that there is no woman, who, if the opportunity is presented, will resist temptation. Even chastity is not a virtue; there must continence, or there is iniquity. The woman is not a man because she has committed sin in a former birth, and her sex is a punishment for her vice. With such sentiments expressed by one who is regarded as the all-wise, we need not wonder that in Buddhist countries woman has been downtrodden and despised.*³

A Buddhist revival, which defended Buddhism as rational, optimistic and far superior to Christianity, resulted from the reception of this contempt. When she presented a paper along these lines, arguing that Buddhism was superior to other religions in its attitude to women, drawing on one accurate strand of Buddhist history, she did not expect to be questioned. When she was questioned, she reacted as though the power relationships of the colonial period were being replayed. Because of this, she could not see that the meeting envisioned a reciprocal exploration between women of different religions about the weaknesses in all religions on the issue of gender. The mistrust she had of Christians was no doubt confirmed.

In the second cameo, however, the power relationships were more reciprocal, nurturing an affirmation of similarity and solidarity between Christians and Buddhists. Women, in both traditions, were able to share what united their vocations: renunciation and meditation.

Power relations are a key issue whenever Buddhists and Christians meet, whether this involves discussions on gender or any other

topic. This power works at different levels. There are power structures within each religion that discriminate against women, oppress men by forcing them into a particular role, and present only one normative way of being man or woman. And there are power structures within our societies that do the same. However, issues connected with power are also present in the convening and moderating of interreligious dialogues. Although power may be an object of discussion at a consultation, unequal and potentially disempowering relationships may be at work in a way that can be masked from the convenors and some participants. The following questions are of critical importance: Is one religion at the dialogue table perceived by the others present to be more powerful? If so, has this perception arisen because one religion is seen as more powerful numerically, either around the dialogue table or in the world, or because one religion already has an agreed vocabulary on the topic to be discussed that is not shared by the other participants? If this perception is present, for either reason, the consequence is that some participants may feel weaker and more vulnerable, and this can pave the way for defensiveness and mistrust, or an inability to participate.

My first hope, in any Buddhist-Christian encounter, is that the partners to it will rise to the challenge of interacting with each other without defensiveness, and with respect, honesty and courtesy. If there is a numerical or conceptual asymmetry in power, or anything else that might cause mistrust, my hope is always that it can be voiced, faced and transcended with honesty and respect.

My second hope is that partners in Buddhist-Christian dialogues will engage fully with three factors that inevitably arise between the two religions: similarities, differences and complementarities. All three of these, I would suggest, can be opportunities for Buddhists and Christians to enrich and challenge each other, but this is most particularly true for the differences

³ Hardy, Robert Spence, *The Jubilee Memorials of the Wesleyan Mission, South Ceylon* (Colombo: Wesleyan Mission Press, 1864), 251; quoted in Harris, Elizabeth, *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter: Religious, Missionary and Colonial Experience in Nineteenth Century Sri Lanka* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 70.

and the areas in which our beliefs and practices may complement each other. Where participants have the knowledge, willingness and experience to interrogate all three, there the fruits of interreligious learning are immense.

In order to illustrate what I mean, I will mention a selection of the similarities, differences and complementarities that have arisen in my own Buddhist-Christian encounters on the topics of gender, sexuality and power. I will concentrate mainly on Theravāda Buddhism, the form of Buddhism present in Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Sri Lanka, and will give more attention to the Buddhist side of the encounter.

To start with the similarities, both Christianity and Buddhism possess texts that appear to embody both a negative assessment of women and the presupposition that heterosexuality is normative. For instance, in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* of the Pāli Canon, the textual corpus of Theravāda Buddhism, these words are placed in the mouth of the Buddha when his closest companion, the monk Ānanda, asks, “Why is it that women do not sit in council, or engage in business or go to Kamboja?”

*Ānanda, women are prone to anger; women are envious; women are miserly; women are unwise. This is why women do not sit in council engage in business, or go to Kamboja.*⁴

Four negative qualities are attributed to women here. In other parts of the Pāli Canon, women are represented as temptresses, capable of drawing monks away from their religious path. Although it could be argued that the focus of such texts is the weakness of men, rather than the inherent nature of women, these texts nevertheless appear to indict women. For instance, when Ānanda asks how men

should conduct themselves towards women, the Buddha is recorded as replying:

“Do not see them, Ānanda.”

“But if we should see them, how should we behave, Lord?”

“Do not speak to them, Ānanda.”

“But if they should speak to us, Lord, how should we behave?”

*“Practise mindfulness, Ānanda.”*⁵

At another point in the Canon, women and men are represented as mutually obsessed with the physicality of each other:

Bhikkhus, I do not see even one other form that so obsesses the mind of a man as the form of a woman. The form of a woman obsesses the mind of a man...

*Bhikkhus, I do not see even one other form that so obsesses the mind of a woman as the form of a man. The form of a man obsesses the mind of a woman.*⁶

The pattern is then extended to the sound, the smell, the taste and the touch of women and men.

To turn to Christianity and the New Testament, these words are said to have been written by St Paul:

*But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man and the head of Christ is God. ... Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man.*⁷

A clear subordination of woman to man is present, reinforced by other verses in the same text; for instance, one that declares women should be “silent in the churches” (I Corinthians 14:34). In a similar vein, a letter ascribed to Timothy contains this:

⁴ *Aṅguttara Nikāya* II 82-83: Bhikkhu Bodhi (transl.), *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha. A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom, 2012), 465.

⁵ *Dīgha Nikāya* II 141: Maurice Walsh (transl.), *The Long Discourses of the Buddha. A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom, 1995), 264.

⁶ *Aṅguttara Nikāya* I 1-2: Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha. A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya*, 90.

⁷ New Revised Standard Version, I Corinthians 11:3,9.

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet, she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty (I Timothy 2:11-12).

However, in the texts of both religions, the negative is outweighed by the positive, although the richness of the positive has been overlooked in practice. Buddhism, for instance, possesses what is perhaps the first global example of women's literature: the *Therīgāthā*, found in the *Kuddhaka Nikāya* of the *Sutta Piṭaka* within the Pāli texts. The *Therīgāthā* contains words of the Buddha to individual Buddhist *bhikkhūṇī* (Pāli, a nun with higher ordination) and also the verses of the early *bhikkhūṇī* themselves, each set of which has a personal narrative attached to them. Most of the women who speak through this text have achieved the very highest attainment: enlightenment.

To give an example of the Buddha's encouragement of the early *bhikkhūṇī*, he is recorded as saying this to a *bhikkhūṇī* named Dhīrā:

Come, O Dhīrā, reach up and touch the goal

Where all distractions cease, where sense is stilled.

Where dwelleth bliss; win thou Nibbāna, win

*That sure Salvation which hath no beyond.*⁸

The message of this is unequivocal. Enlightenment is not gendered. And the actual verses of the *bhikkhūṇī* demonstrate this in practice. This is a nun called Uttamā:

The Seven Factors of the Awakened mind,

Seven Ways whereby we may Nibbāna win,

All, all have I developed and made ripe,

⁸ *Therīgāthā* v.6. C.A.F. Rhys Davids (transl.), *Poems of the Early Buddhist Nuns (Therīgāthā)* Revised Version (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2009/1909), 9-10.

Even according to the Buddha's word.

Fulfilled is heart's desire: I win the Void,

I win the Signless! Buddha's daughter I,

Born of his mouth, his blessed word, I stand,

*Transported with Nibbāna's bliss away.*⁹

That there were enlightened female teachers as the Pāli texts were being drawn together is also shown by the fact that discourses by women are included in the Pāli Canon. The *bhikkhūṇī* Dhammadinnā, for instance, is recorded as preaching on core Buddhist doctrines to her former husband, Visākha. At the end of the discourse, Visākha recounts his entire conversation with Dhammadinnā to the Buddha, who is reported as saying:

*The bhikkhūṇī Dhammadinnā is wise, Visākha, the bhikkhūṇī Dhammadinnā has great wisdom. If you had asked me the meaning of this, I would have explained it to you in the same way that the bhikkhūṇī Dhammadinnā has explained it.*¹⁰

This is a rhetorical device to justify the inclusion in the textual canon of a discourse offered by a woman. Dhammadinnā's words are, in effect, confirmed as *Buddha vacana*, the word of the Buddha.

In some Buddhist countries, however, it is impossible now for women to gain higher ordination as a *bhikkhūṇī*; namely, a nun who follows the entire monastic discipline of over 300 rules (the *Bhikkhūṇī Patimokkha*). For instance, in Myanmar, there is a vigorous and educated Order of "Contemporary Nuns", who renounce and wear robes but follow only ten precepts or rules. There is no *Bhikkhūṇī* Order.¹¹ In Sri Lanka, a *Bhikkhūṇī* Order imploded in

⁹ *Therīgāthā* v. 45-46. *Ibid.*, 28-29.

¹⁰ *Cūḷavedalla Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya* I 305-306. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi (transl.), *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom, 1995), 403-404.

¹¹ Hiroko Kawanami, *Renunciation and Empowerment of Buddhist Nuns in Myanmar-Burma: Building a Community of Female Faithful* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

about the 11th or 12th century CE, because it lost the ability to ordain new recruits. The Order was not reinstated through *bhikkhuni* from another country, because no other Theravāda country had a *Bhikkhuni* Order. The only countries in which there were *bhikkhuni* followed Mahāyāna Buddhism—China, for instance. Towards the end of the 20th century, however, through Sakyadhita (Daughters of the Buddha), an international organization of Buddhist women, founded in 1987 at a conference on Buddhist nuns held in Bodhgaya, higher ordination was brought back to the Theravāda world through ceremonies in the USA, India and Sri Lanka with the aid of sympathetic monks and Mahāyāna *bhikkhuni*. In Sri Lanka, *bhikkhuni* now number at least 600. They are not officially recognized by the state but are appreciated by many lay people as teachers and living examples of living the holy life of a renunciant. The story is ongoing.

As for the Bible, it contains narratives of numerous strong women: Sarah, Hagar, Rebekah, Bathsheba, Tabitha, Lydia, Priscilla, Phoebe and the Mary mentioned in Paul's letter to the Romans, as well as the well-known ones: Ruth, Esther, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Martha. Few Christians can name even those I have labelled "well-known." For instance, an Episcopal priest in the USA, Janice Nunnally-Cox, who wrote a book on the women in the Bible as far back as 1981, entitled *Fore-Mothers*, claimed that one male priest to whom she spoke about the book could only name one woman in the Bible, Gomer.¹² The ordination narrative in Buddhism also has a parallel in Christianity: women are still barred from the priesthood in the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

In both Buddhism and Christianity, therefore, narratives of women and memories of women achievers have been marginalized. This, in turn, has an impact on the experience of women in the present.

¹² Janice Nunnally-Cox, *Fore-Mothers: Women of the Bible* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1989), xii.

When Buddhists and Christians meet to discuss issues concerning gender, sexuality and power, similarities emerge, arising from texts, traditions and current experience.

Differences

One significant difference between Buddhism and Christianity concerns cosmology. As I have shown, the early texts of Buddhism clearly show that enlightenment is not gendered. Both men and women are capable of reaching enlightenment. However, in some later narratives, a different view of the capacities of women appear; namely, the view that women are born women because of unwholesome actions in past lives, according to the principle of *kamma*, which states that every moral action has a consequence. Wholesome actions produce wholesome fruit; unwholesome actions produce unwholesome fruit. Women are, therefore, women because the consequences of negative actions in the past have come to fruition. I have previously argued that one reason for the development of this view could have been the awareness in Early Buddhism of the difficulties women had to face in a patriarchal society. The *bhikkhuni* Kisāgotamī, for instance, attributes this view to the Buddha:

Woeful is a woman's lot! hath he declared,

Tamer and driver of the hearts of men:

Woeful when sharing home with hostile wives,

Woeful when giving birth in bitter pain,

Some seeking death, or e'er they suffer twice,

Piercing the throat; the delicate poison take,

Woe too when mother-murdering embryo

*Comes not to birth and both alike find death.*¹³

It is but a short step from this to the conclusion that such woes could only come

¹³ *Therīgāthā* v. 215-216. Rhys Davids, *Poems of the Early Buddhist Nuns*, 90-91.

to one who had done wrong in a previous life. In addition, the view that a woman could not become a Buddha arose, in part due to the fact that one of the physical marks of a Buddha, according to text and tradition, is a sheathed penis. After all, only a man could have a penis to be sheathed! In the Mayāhāna narrative tradition, for instance, there are instances of highly developed female *bodhisattvas* (beings aspiring to Buddhahood) miraculously changing into men before achieving Buddhahood.¹⁴

These narratives are dependent on a cosmology that recognizes rebirth into many planes of being, and patterns of cause and effect that manifest over massive periods of time. The narrative connected with the nun Ubbirī in the *Therīgāthā* sheds light on the massive scale of this. Ubbirī's daughter dies and she is distraught with grief, weeping in a cemetery. The Buddha comes to her there and asks why she is weeping. When she replies that she is weeping for her dead daughter, the Buddha reveals that some 84,000 of her daughters are buried in that cemetery and adds, "For which of them do you weep?"¹⁵ Ubbirī, seeing the truth of the Buddha's teaching, becomes enlightened. In Buddhism, to realize the truth of suffering on this scale is to realize the need for liberation from rebirth.

Christianity, with its different cosmology, does not have an exact parallel to these patterns of suffering played out through rebirth over vast computations of time. This would seem to be a major difference between the two religions. Nevertheless, Christianity holds within itself a principle of action in that Christians have no difficulty in affirming that our actions have consequences over time. The books of the Old Testament are interwoven with the understanding that God's Covenant with the Hebrew people is predicated on their

faithfulness in terms of action. Hosea, for instance, laments that the consequence of moral failure is that the land mourns and living beings perish:

*Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel; for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness and loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.*¹⁶

St. Paul is reported as saying to the Galatian Christians, "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for your reap whatever you sow... So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we reap at harvest-time if we do not give up."¹⁷

Inherent here is what Buddhists might call a principle of action or *kamma*; namely, that there are consequences for everything we do—not, admittedly, within the frame of one person's repeated existences but for the planet and subsequent generations. Christians are only just beginning to see the truth of this principle with reference to patterns of patriarchy and discrimination. Christian women, in the 20th century, for instance, were drawn to an analysis of the consequences for Christianity of the tendency to construct the Godhead as a male person, described through the non-inclusive language of domination.¹⁸ I would want to argue that, in spite of the differences between the two religions when it comes to rebirth, Buddhists and Christians move into the area of complementarity when speaking of actions and their consequences.

Complementarities

In my own long encounter with and immersion in Buddhism, over a period of 30

¹⁴ See Paul, Diana, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in Mahāyāna Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1989).

¹⁵ *Therīgāthā* narrative connected with v. 51-53. Rhys Davis, *Psalms of the Early Buddhist Nuns*, 30-31, 166-211.

¹⁶ Revised Standard Version: Hosea 4:1-3.

¹⁷ Revised Standard Version: Galatians 7:6-10.

¹⁸ See, for instance, Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (London: SCM, 1983).

years, Buddhist meditation techniques have been one area I have frequently mentioned as offering complementary wisdom to Christian practices of prayer and contemplation.¹⁹ Buddhist meditation is not a journey into trance-like states or a “legal high,” but a form of mental culture through which we come to see how our minds and our emotions work. Sitting in silence, developing concentration, and watching what arises in our mind and heart, we can become more aware of how greed, hatred, aversion, attraction, anger, jealousy and a host of other emotions and thoughts arise. And becoming more self-aware can lead to being able to better control or even transcend what is negative and harmful to others.

Together with members of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), I have also argued that meditation and social action should go hand-in-hand. Although meditation may involve a withdrawal into silence for the time of its duration, this withdrawal is not incompatible with action to cut through the suffering of others.²⁰ Rather, meditation can help us discern with greater clarity how to act wisely and effectively, avoiding responses driven by anger, anxiety or hatred. Buddhist forms of meditation, I would argue, can be used by non-Buddhists. They can complement Christian forms of prayer, particularly forms of prayer connected with centring, silence and self-awareness.

I would like to mention another complementarity that is particularly important in any discussion between the two religions on gender, sexuality and power: the importance of causal analysis in Buddhism. This is linked with my discussion of the principle of action (*kamma*) but goes further. I have concentrated in this paper on discrimination against women. However, in patriarchal societies both men and women

suffer. In analyzing how patriarchy is expressed in society, causal analysis is essential. The “house” within which Buddhism lies is the Four Noble Truths and these are predicated on causal analysis. At their heart is a question: Why is human existence unsatisfactory and full of pain? The first Noble Truth simply states this as fact. Life is unsatisfactory. In Pāli, it is *dukkha*. The second truth pinpoints that *dukkha* arises because of a cause; namely, egotistical craving (Pāli: *taṇhā*). The third truth states that *dukkha* can cease if the cause is eradicated. The fourth truth offers an eightfold path for the eradication of *taṇhā*. These Noble Truths admit of no model for analyzing the problem of existence other than the causal. There is no room for the intervention of divinity, which differentiates the Buddhist approach from that of theistic religions. However, this rigorous emphasis on causal analysis can, I would suggest, complement theistic approaches. For it has an application that leaps outside the Four Noble Truths and that is particularly useful in the discussion of issues connected with patriarchy, gender and power. Any interreligious discussion of these issues must ask questions such as: What is the cause of the selective approach to our texts and traditions in a patriarchal society? What is the cause of the patriarchy that makes both men and women, and indeed those who do not identify with either gender, victim? What are the causes of the expressions of oppression and violence that can be seen in human trafficking? Discussion of the qualities and contours of patriarchy and gender-based violence is not enough. If these factors of our lives are to be eradicated, causal analysis is essential.

In examining cause and solutions, another complementarity may arise: the relationship between justice and compassion. Christians who are concerned for positive change in the world tend to employ “justice” as a key term to express what is hoped for—justice for the oppressed and victimized. God’s reign, for instance, is perceived as a state that is characterised by justice and peace for

¹⁹ See, for instance, Elizabeth J. Harris, *Buddhism for a Violent World: A Christian Reflection*. (London: Epworth 2010), 81-104.

²⁰ See Elizabeth J. Harris, *Detachment and Compassion in Early Buddhism* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1997).

all. Buddhists, however, are less comfortable with the term “justice.” It does not resonate with the way in which Buddhists envision an ideal society. This is partly because of the concept of rebirth. Most Buddhists do not believe that everything that happens to a person or to a community is conditioned by the past actions of that person or community. However, they would assert that past actions cannot be edited out of this picture. In this context, the response to this is a call to compassion rather than a call for justice. For no one, except perhaps an enlightened being, can see the previous births of others to ascertain where justice for each individual lies, given that each of us comes into the world with a karmic history, which may include the wholesome and unwholesome. We ourselves may have a myriad of unwholesome deeds in our backgrounds! Compassion recognizes this and also that all humans seek happiness and freedom from suffering. All human are also radically interconnected.

If we are to work for a world where there is less suffering and discrimination, the development of compassion is crucial for Buddhists. It helps them come to a point where every living being is seen as important, where no one is judged because they may be suffering the fruit of past unwholesome actions, where every person is seen as precious and worthy of help so that their suffering is alleviated. Buddhists may also speak of the need for everyone, not only the oppressors, to reduce greed and craving, again so that suffering and anguish is reduced—whether this is expressed as

craving for profit, craving for pleasure or craving for power.

The need for justice and the need for compassion are not incompatible. They represent two lenses through which the current state of the world can be viewed. However, the differences between them can lead to misunderstandings within Buddhist-Christian encounters, if Christians accuse Buddhists of not being sensitive enough to the need for justice and Buddhists accuse Christians of not extending compassion for all.

Concluding thoughts

My hope in any Buddhist-Christian encounter or conversation is that the participants will have enough trust in one another that they will not be afraid to discuss differences and complementarities as well as similarities. Similarities are important and can warm the hearts of both Buddhists and Christians. However, I would suggest it is through our differences and those aspects of our two traditions that are complementary that we can truly grow and be challenged to action to create a better world, free of discrimination and the lack of compassion.

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God and *Sunyata* (Emptiness)

Boon Lin Ngo

As Hans Küng has argued forcefully, “No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundations of the religions.”¹ Dialogue between religions is not only crucial in our world today for peace, but we can learn much from each other, and the results could enrich and inspire us to expand our theological horizons and deepen our understandings of Ultimate Reality. This short paper seeks to explore the problems of classical theism and how the idea of *Sunyata* (Emptiness) in Buddhism can enrich Christian theology.

To speak of Christian theology is to speak of God. There is nothing more important than articulating a theology of God and having a logically consistent understanding of the idea of God when one begins to talk about any kind of theology. As John B. Cobb has rightly asserted in his book *A Christian Natural Theology*:

*We live in a time when the categories in which the Christian message has traditionally been presented have lost all meaning for major segments of the population, the crux of the matter has to do with the concepts of man and God ... For much of the culture that is growing up about us and within us, “God” has become an empty sound. This is no longer a problem only for those Christians trying to communicate with a special segment of the intelligentsia estranged from the church. It has become the problem of the suburban pastor in his dealings with his most sensitive church leaders and youth. Perhaps most of all it has become the problem of the perceptive minister in dealing with himself and his own understanding of his ministry.*²

¹ See Hans Küng, *Islam, Past Present & Future* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), xxiii.

² See John B. Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965), 13-14.

Cobb goes so far as to suggest that to define “God” and to give the word a meaningful definition, so that it would have its appropriate reference, is “a matter of ultimate importance for the health, even the survival, of Christian faith”³ and “mutuality between humanity and Heaven.”⁴

Obviously, in the 21st century, the theology of God as father is not only inadequate, but has perpetuated sexism and oppression.⁵ We, thus, need to reconstruct our theology of God and the kyriarchal structure of the community of faith, so that God can no longer extend “His” “imperialistic” authority and power over all the boundaries in “His” “empire.” The theological construction of God as male by referring God as “He” inevitably authorizes male domination in the social order and validates male experience as the standard experience against which all experiences are evaluated. The resolution, however, is not to make God a transgender God, or to liberate our God from androcentrism, but to free our theological construction of God from anthropomorphism. In other words, the traditional understanding of God as a Being

³ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 14-15.

⁴ Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong, ed. *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 17.

⁵ Many feminist theologians have pointed out that God as father is highly problematic, as God is gendered as a man. When males find their source in God, who is gendered as a man, men are like God, but women have been historically and systematically marginalized as objects of subjugation and domination. The symbol of God as a man, thus, has been one of the major criticisms of feminist theology. See Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986). This book was first published in 1968 by Mary Daly, a leading feminist theologian in the twentieth century. It is considered as one of the earliest and most important critiques of sexism and its roots in the Christian tradition. She has famously said in the book that “if God is male, then the male is God.” Kathy Rudy has also argued forcefully that sexism and homophobia are inextricably intertwined. See Kathy Rudy, *Sex and the Church: Gender, Homosexual and the Transformation of Christian Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

in monotheism needs to be challenged and modified.

Monotheism has corresponded well with the imperialism of empires. Many acts of violence have been committed in the name of religion, especially of monotheistic religion. It is no coincidence that so much religious terrorism and extreme violence is committed by believers of monotheistic religions who believe in the Sovereign God of absolute power. These religious believers are simply imitating their God in exercising the power to condemn their enemies. To put it bluntly, it is simply because they have found their prime model in their God.

The symbol of God as “the one,” as a king who possesses absolute and unilateral power, is a symbol system of hierarchical and oppressive kingdom. Feminist theologians like Rosemary Radford Ruether have been extremely critical of the image of God constructed by traditional theology. Ruether cautioned us that

*[p]atriarchal theology uses the parent image for God to prolong spiritual infantilism as virtue and to make autonomy and assertion of free will a sin. Parenting in patriarchal society also becomes the way of enculturating us to the stereotypic male and female roles ... parenting language for God reinforces patriarchal power rather than liberating us from it...*⁶

Hartshorn has also advised us to move beyond the theological metaphor of parent-child relationships to the more intimate body and mind analogy to indicate the divine relationship with the world.⁷

As Suzanne Pharr has pointed out, homophobia and sexism are highly interconnected; it is virtually impossible to view either one of these oppressions in isolation.⁸ In order to dismantle

homophobia or heterosexism, one needs to tackle sexism head on, as the former has its roots in the latter. Therefore, in order to argue in favour of queer people, it is inevitable to reject the patriarchal God, which is the oppressive divine image of classical theism.

Monotheistic religions, including Christianity, believe in One God who has absolute power, or, in other words, God is omnipotent. By believing in one true God who is omnipotent, Christians believe that their, and only their religion, is the truth and consign all other religions to falsehood. Everything that disagrees and is incompatible with the Words of God—namely, the Bible—is wrong. The Bible has thus become the life-shaping authority and normativity of Christians, because God’s Word is absolute and irrefutable.

Throughout history, countless acts of violence and bloodshed have been committed by people who hold this concept of God. Hatred, intolerance and exclusion are the inevitable consequences of the monotheistic religions that believe in the omnipotence of God. The God of monotheism is omnipotent and this theology of God is inherently exclusive and has the essential potential for its exclusion to explode into violence. It is no surprise that Christians throughout history have been dismissive, if not downright hostile, towards everything and everyone who disagrees with the Bible. It also explains why the Bible has been and can be used to maintain political power, wage wars, justify slavery, regulate behaviours and persecute minorities. It also explains why monotheistic religions like Christianity, Judaism and Islam have lashed out at each other in violence, again and again. Their omnipotent God compels the full submission of their followers and requires them to exclude the other.

The theological concepts of monotheism and omnipotence presuppose that God is not only all-powerful, but is right in everything He does. The distinction

⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 69-70.

⁷ See Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984).

⁸ Suzanne Pharr, *Homophobia: Weapon of Sexism* (Berkeley: Chardon Press, 1997).

between truth and falsehood is highlighted; everything that disagrees with the teaching of God is, by definition, wrong. The followers of the omnipotent God refuse to tolerate differing opinions and practices, which are thought to be despicable, and are thus condemned by these religions. Differences are condemned, not only because they are deemed to be false, but also because they are viewed as the threats to the truth.

Homophobia, violence and monotheistic religion are highly interrelated. Bishop Gene Robinson, the first openly gay Bishop in the world, wrote:

Not long ago I had a conversation with six gay teens, not one of whom had ever had any formal religious training or influence. Every one of them knew the word “abomination,” and every one of them thought that was what God thought of them. They couldn’t have located the Book of Leviticus in the Bible if their lives depended on it yet they had absorbed this message from the antigay air they breathe every day....[B]ullyng behaviours would not exist without the undergirding and the patina of respect provided by religious fervour against LGBT people. It’s time for “tolerant” religious people to acknowledge the straight line between the official anti-gay theologies of their denominations and the deaths of these young people. Nothing short of changing our theology of human sexuality will save these young and precious lives.⁹

The exclusive and exclusionary negation by which monotheism defines itself—“No other Gods”—not only demonizes and denounces all other religions; it has also perpetuated violence against anyone deemed to be promoting falsehood among believers. Intolerance is inherent in monotheism and in the theological idea of omnipotence.

Why is power so basic to many people’s concept of God? Why is the belief in God’s omnipotence so important to many

Christians? Anna Case-Winters poignantly answers by stating that “...human need is the chief cause for the imputation to the divine of great power ... because we want our needs to be met and our prayers to be answered, we project an image of an all-powerful God who is able to do.”¹⁰ “Almighty God,” is still the most common appellation used in contemporary Christian practice as Christians address God in church and in personal prayers.

As Charles Hartshorne has pointed out, the theological idea of God as omnipotent is highly problematic. To say that God is omnipotent, or all powerful, is to say that God has the highest controlling power that “is capable of monopolizing decision-making, of fully determining the details of the world,”¹¹ and leaving no room or freedom to human beings. Put simply, it is to deny the freedom of individuals.

To say that God is omnipotent also means that, as Hartshorne put it, “God is wholly active, independent, or absolute in relation to the creatures and that the creatures are wholly passive in relation to God.” This contradicts the idea of God as love, because it is nonsense and absurd to claim “a lover is uninfluenced by a partly self-made loved one.”¹² In other words, it is the tyrant conception of God. God does nothing but command, and all God’s creatures are expected to do nothing but merely obey. Bluntly put, God is the master, we are merely slaves, or worse still, we are merely puppets who are permitted to think that we make decisions when in reality we just follow the decisions made by God, the tyrant.

According to Hartshorne, to say that God is not omnipotent is not to limit the power of God:

⁹ Gene Robinson, “How Religion is Killing Our Most Vulnerable Youth?” *The Huffington Post* [October 24, 2012], http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bishop-gene-robinson/how-religion-is-killing-o_b_764568.html (accessed October 24, 2012).

¹⁰ Anna Case-Winters, *God’s Power: Traditional Understandings and Contemporary Challenges* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 24.

¹¹ Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 38.

¹² *Ibid.*, 45.

*Omnipotence as usually conceived is a false or indeed absurd ideal, which in truth limits God, denies to him any world worth talking about: a world of living, that is to say, significantly decision-making, agents. It is the tradition which did indeed terribly limit divine power, the power to foster creativity even in the least of the creatures.*¹³

As many Christians argue for a monotheistic understanding of God as an absolute powerful Being, Buddhism offers us a very different picture and understanding of the Ultimate Reality, which is *Sunyata* (Emptiness).

According to Buddhism, emptiness or voidness could be identified as the ultimate mode of being of every phenomenon.¹⁴ Everything could actually be deemed to be empty or void, not because it does not exist, but everything does not exist independently. Things exist as a result of a complicated web of causes and conditions, and thus they do not have their own autonomous self-existence. As Ippolito Desideri writes, “there is not even one substance established as inherently existent. They understand that all existing substances are viewed as empty, the emptiness of inherent existence itself.”¹⁵ *Sunyata* is to affirm the non-substantial existence of the understanding of reality and nonexistence.

Thus, to compare God to Emptiness or *Sunyata* does not simply mean that God is nothing or God does not exist, but as Nishida asserts, “the true God is not the usual idea of God, but rather *die Gottheit* such as spoken of by the mystics in the

West. The true God is the “emptiness” of the *Prajnaparamita Sutra*.”¹⁶

Someone asked Yamada Roshi who was one of the most prominent Zen masters in Japan, “what is the relation between Emptiness and God?” He answered, “Emptiness is God. God cannot be thought of as other than emptiness.”¹⁷ Emptiness, or *Sunyata*, is the most important concept in the philosophy of Nagarjuna, the founder of the Madhyamika School of Buddhism. As Han Waldenfels writes:

*By Nagarjuna’s time, the word sunyata (emptiness) or sunya (empty) already had a long history behind it. Etymologically, the Sanskrit word derives from the root svi meaning “to swell.” The idea of swelling was then further tied up with that of hollowness. “Something which looks “swollen” from the outside is “hallow” inside. The relationship is made clearer by the fact that the mathematical symbol for zero was originally none other than the symbol for sunyata. The root word can be shown to extend still further into Indogermanic realm in the Greek words kyo (to become pregnant) and koilia (the body cavity, the inside of man), and in the Latin words cumulus (heap), caulis (stem) and cavus (cave).*¹⁸

Masao Abe has succinctly asserted:

*The Ground of our existence is nothingness, Sunyata, because it can never be objectified. This Sunyata is deep enough to encompass even God, the “object” of mystical union as well as the object of faith. For Sunyata is not the nothingness from which God created everything, but the nothingness from which God himself emerged.*¹⁹

If God, the Ultimate Concern in Christianity, is viewed and understood as *Sunyata*, thus, God is not only beyond male and female, but God is also beyond a Being. From the perspective of *Sunyata* in

¹³ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁴ According to Robert Kennedy, a Catholic priest and a famous Zen master in the United States, emptiness is the fundamental doctrine of Buddhism. This emptiness, as he argues, “is the living, dynamic, formless source of all existence; it exists beyond individuality or personality; it is unimaginable, inconceivable, and capable of endless transformation.” See Robert Kennedy, *Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 27.

¹⁵ Ruben Habito. *Total Liberation: Zen Spirituality and the Social Dimension* (New York: Orbis, 1989), 87.

¹⁶ Kitaro Nishida, “Toward a Philosophy of Religion with the Concept of Pre-Established Harmony as Guide,” *EB* III/1 (1970), 35.

¹⁷ David Roy, *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 9 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 57.

¹⁸ See Hans Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness: Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), 19.

¹⁹ Abe Masao, “God, Emptiness, and the True Self,” *EB* II/2 (1969), 28.

Buddhism, anything that can be identified or labelled as “He” or “She” or “it” is to be understood as a Being, and is no longer ultimate. If God is the ground of being, as Paul Tillich has famously proposed, then God cannot be a being or a Being itself. God therefore must be above the God of theism.²⁰ God is the ground of being, hence it is in God that we live, we move and have our being (Acts 17:28). As Jeremiah has said, God fills heaven and earth (Jeremiah 23:24), God is experienced in all things.

To compare God to *Sunyata* or emptiness is not to say that God is not real. Leslie Dewart, a Catholic philosopher, has argued this point eloquently:

*Reality, therefore, in which (and in relation to which), man is (and is conscious), is neither essence nor existence nor being—though being, essence and existence are real (which is why reality may both exist and be intelligible). But reality remains: it is that in relation to which absolute contingencies can be absolutely contingent upon. In other words, the reality of being is not distinct from the being of real being; but reality as such is not being. Reality as such is that in which being can be real: reality is that in which existence can be and essence can be understood.... God is, to speak properly, not “ultimate” reality, since he is not the reality, which exists “after” immediately reality: he is the reality in relation to which any other reality is real. God is reality as such. Thus, whatever is true of any being is true because it is real (and not only because it is). On the other hand, reality as such does not exist, and therefore, the reality of any given being, or the reality of being as such is not the same as reality as such. Of course, reality exists as being, and being as such is real. But existing reality is not reality as such; it is being. Thus, being is real because God is real, but God does not exist simply because being exists.*²¹

Emptiness is not nothingness in its literal sense. Emptiness is not a being. But emptiness is all forms of existence. *Sunyata* is not nothingness in a literal sense

distinguished from the samethingness in our life. *Sunyata* is the ultimate reality, just like God, which can be understood as creativity, or the creative source of all beings. As illustrated in *Heart Sutra*, emptiness is form, form is emptiness; emptiness is not form, form is not emptiness. *Sunyata* is beyond form and emptiness. It is indeed a dynamic symbol of ultimate reality, which is beyond logic and any pre-representational understanding of human beings. It is beyond words and all kind of social constructions.

John Myrdhin Reynolds describes *Sunyata* as the source of the primordial energy that brings all possible forms together and brings everything into existence. He writes:

*The Primordial State is not just emptiness in the negative sense of void or nothingness, a mere absence of something. Rather, the state of sunyata, this vast empty space where emptiness and luminosity are inseparable, represents the state of pure potentiality. It is the space of dimension or matrix of all existence out of which all possible forms or manifestation (snangba) arise, like clouds appearing spontaneously in the empty open sky. It is not just that forms lack an inherent nature (rang-bzhin med-pa) or substance, but equally inherent in sunyata is the potentiality for the arising of forms; this is the meaning of luminosity.*²²

Masao Abe argues, “*Sunyata* indicates boundless openness without any particular fixed center. *Sunyata* is free not only from egocentrism but also from anthropocentrism, cosmocentrism, and theocentricism. It is not oriented by any kind of centrism.”²³ *Sunyata* is more appropriate than any concept that I know of to which one can compare God, because *Sunyata*, as Masao Abe argues, is entirely “unobjectifiable, unconceptualizable, and unattainable by reason or will.”²⁴

²⁰ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 187.

²¹ Leslie Dewart, *The Foundations of Belief* (London: Herder and Herder, 1969), 492-493, 495.

²² John Myrdhin Reynolds, *Self-Liberation Through Seeing With Naked Awareness* (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 2010), 281.

²³ John B. Cobb Jr., and Christopher Ives, ed., *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1990), 30.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

The understanding of God as *Sunyata*, however, is not an absolutely strange or completely a foreign idea in Christian theology. Augustine is acutely aware of the sharp distinction between God and human beings; namely, that God is God, human is human and God is not a human being, and a human being cannot be God. He also says that God “is more inward than my most inward part and higher than the highest element with me.”²⁵ He writes (to God),

*You are most high and most near, most secret and most present, have no bodily members, some larger, other smaller, but are everywhere a whole and never limited in space. You are certainly not our physical shape. Yet you made humanity in your image, and man from head to foot is contained in space.*²⁶

According to Augustine, to say that God is within us and is closer to us than we are to ourselves, is to recognize the correlation between the God of the self and the self. It is to say that God is not an external object of worship only; God is not only to be thought about, God is correlative with our deepest desires and feelings. God constitutes the human subject as the inner Word of love that overflows within one and as the outer Word.

Augustine attempts to combine the transcendence and immanence of God in a strikingly beautiful statement: “God is higher than my highest and more inward than my inner self.” God is transcendent above all creatures, and yet God also has some very intimate relationships with all creatures.

While some theologians like Augustine have argued forcefully that God is wholly other, and unknowable as the transcendent God, others, like Schleiermacher, say that God could be known even in His transcendent nature, because the transcendence of God could be positioned in self-consciousness. In other words, through the immediate intuition of consciousness, one could feel the transcendence of God. Since

consciousness also leads to thinking and thoughtfulness, it is through self-consciousness that we might “know” God and God is “knowable” to us. Thus, God is no longer wholly other in the absolute sense of being impenetrable. Thus, God becomes the immanent transcendent.

Augustine believes that God is all-transcending, and yet utterly imminent. Basil Studer has poignantly pointed out that Augustine’s theology of God is full of paradoxes; God is both far and near, distant and with us. He has written:

*With the aid of Cicero and especially of the Platonic tradition, Augustine had discovered that God is truth (veritas) and changeless being (ipsum esse). But, following the Judeo-Christian tradition, he also reached the point of distinguishing between God as Creator and all good but mutable things. At the same time, he also came to realize that our Creator God is also near to us, carries us in the divine hands, guides our life, and brings to life everything good in us.*²⁷

It is interesting to note how Augustine describes our relationship with God. He asserts:

*When people see these things with the help of your Spirit, it is you who are seeing in them. When, therefore, they see that things are good, you are seeing that they are good. Whatever pleases them for your sake is pleasing you in them. The things which by the help of your Spirit delight us are delighting you in us...therefore, they see to be good by the Spirit of God, it is not they but God who is seeing that it is good.*²⁸

The use of antithesis is a distinctive feature of Augustine’s theology of God as it is articulated in his *Confessions*. Augustine’s theology of God is a Zen-like riddle. God is, and yet God is not. God is transcendent, and yet immanent. Chinese philosopher Lou Zi captures this wisdom succinctly as he argues that the *Dao* that could be fully

²⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 43.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 93-94.

²⁷ Studer, Basil, *The Grace of Christ and the Grace of God in Augustine Hippo: Christocentrism or Theocentrism?* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 83.

²⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, 300-301.

articulated is not the eternal Tao. If one thinks that one can fully capture and grasp who is God, one is dealing with something else, something less than God. Augustine shares this view as he writes in his commentary on John's Gospel. He says:

All things can be said of God, yet is nothing worthily said of God. Nothing is wider than this utter want. Thou seekest a name befitting Him and findest none; thou seekest in what way soever to speak of Him and thou findest Him in all things.²⁹

One can clearly see that it is of significant importance to recognize the fact that all theologies of God are simply human constructions. In other words, all concepts of our understanding of God are anthropomorphic, and thus, all are inadequate concepts when speaking about God. However, all these concepts are that we human beings can do when we talk about God, for when we speak about God as subject who confronts us in the midst of our human, earthly, historical reality, God inevitably has an anthropomorphic character. To say that our idea of God is anthropomorphic is also to say that it is subject to constant change, for human beings are historical beings, always in the process of changing.

Augustine believes that God is beyond human comprehension. No human language could fully capture and describe the essence of God. He speaks of "...God of whom we ought always to be thinking, and of whom we are not able to think worthily, in praise of whom blessing must at all times be rendered, and whom no speech is sufficient to declare..."³⁰

According to Augustine, God is a mystery. God is beyond our comprehension. About the mystery of God, Augustine says more explicitly:

What then, brethren, shall we say of God? For if thou hast been able to understand what thou wouldest say, it is not God. If thou hast been able to comprehend it, thou hast comprehended something else instead of God. If thou hast been able to comprehend Him as thou thinkest, by so thinking thou hast deceived thyself. This then is not God, if thou hast comprehended it, but if this be God, thou hast not comprehended it. How therefore wouldest thou speak of that which thou canst not comprehend?³¹

In this paper, I have suggested that *Sunyata* is a very important concept, and one of the biggest contributions of Buddhism to the world, and it is indeed a more appropriate concept for Christians to employ to reconstruct the theology of God. If God is really the true God, God is beyond anything we say about God, because the ultimate ground of all things, is necessarily, nameless.

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²⁹ In Joan, *Evang.* XIII, 5. Quoted from Przywara, Erich, S.J., *An Augustine Synthesis* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1936), 83.

³⁰ Augustine, *De Trin.*V.i. Quoted from Przywara, *An Augustine Synthesis*, 83.

³¹ In *Serm.* (de Script N.T.) LII,vi, 16. From Przywara, *An Augustine Synthesis*, 81.

Buddhism and Dalit Women

Swati Kamble

When the World Council of Churches (WCC) invited me to attend an interfaith dialogue conference in Bangkok, tentatively themed “Religion, Gender and Power,” I decided to make a presentation on the impact of Buddhist conversion on Dalit (lower caste) women in Maharashtra. This consultation, as WCC named it, aimed at “bringing together theologians, academics and activists from Christian and Buddhist religions to reflect on the relationship between religion, power and gender and assess the role that religion plays in gender socialization from the perspectives of Christianity and Buddhism, which are Abrahamic and Asiatic, respectively” (taken from the WCC’s preliminary concept note).

I, being an Ambedkarite Buddhist, Dalit women’s rights activist and aspiring academic, decided to embark on writing narratives of Dalit women participating in politics and on how conversion to Buddhism, following the footsteps of Dr Ambedkar, has shaped their views of self and the world. I wanted to look at how a symbolic act of converting to Buddhism changed the lives of these Dalit women, in some respect. However, back in 2009, the findings of my fieldwork in the Marathwada region sowed the seeds to bring forth this phenomenon. To my pleasant surprise, this phenomenon has already been researched and published by Jenkins in *Speaking Truth to Power*, edited by Manu Bhagwat and Anne Feldhaus. Jenkins has written about women’s empowerment through religious conversion and documented the voices of Buddhists in Nagpur.

I will begin with my personal narrative. I call it a narrative for a reason. On the first day of the consultation, in the group discussion and later in the sharing of the discussion, we spoke about the pressing need of looking at religion from a grassroots perspective: from the people’s perspective. How do people

live religion in their day-to-day life? If we were to engage meaningfully in interfaith dialogue, we needed to explore this. In the context of Ambedkarite Buddhism, I have witnessed those at the grassroots level pass on their day-to-day religion through individual and community narratives and oral histories. I therefore feel that sharing one’s story is to carry forward this legacy of knowledge-building. Furthermore, I will share the experiences of former lower caste women participating in local self governance in Marathwada, and will focus on how Ambedkarite Buddhism has an impact on the empowerment of the Dalit women.

Flashback to the year 2009 when I decided to conduct fieldwork in the Marathwada region for my Master’s research on the political participation of Dalit women in the Panchayat Raj Institution (local self-government) in Maharashtra. My focus was to generate a list of factors that facilitate or constrain Dalit women’s active participation in local level politics.

There were crucial reasons for choosing the Marathwada region for my research. Firstly, it has thus far been one of the most backward, feudal and atrocity-prone regions of the Maharashtra state, with a brutal history of violence against Dalits. The Name Change movement, launched by Dalit activists in 1978 to rename Marathwada University in Dr Ambedkar’s name to honour him, ended in bloodshed after a 16-year-long struggle. The Dalits in this region suffered genocide for a decade and a half, with riots affecting over 1200 villages and 25,000 Dalits. The region, however, has a vibrant history of the Dalit movement and the assertion of Dalit communities to claim their rights. Lastly and importantly, the mammoth work done by human rights organizations, such as the Campaign for Human Rights (CHR) and Savitribai Phule Mahila Mandal (SPMM) for sensitization

and the empowerment of Dalits and women in the region made it a potential location for my research.

As for my own narrative, I am currently pursuing a PhD in Socio-Economics at the University of Geneva. I have lived and studied in Europe for few years, and I have been working on issues of caste and gender inequality, advocating for equal rights. However, there are multiple identities and different realities through which I have lived and from which I come. These, of course, shape who I am. I am an Ambedkarite Dalit Buddhist who was born and raised in a slum in Mumbai, into a family of 9 that lived in a 10x12' room we call home. My family still lives there, and it is home to me when I go back to India.

Why do I begin by sharing this? And how is it important in this context? Well, I wish to set a clear context to come to my discussion of how religion—a socially active and engaged humanitarian religion—can transcend the lives of those considered *les miserables*, lesser beings.

The multiple identities I possess at the intersections of caste, class, gender, Dalit Buddhism, an educated woman, a social activist and a feminist frame my standpoint and its rootedness. It is from this standpoint that I speak.

As a girl child I grew up in a community mostly populated by “untouchables”; half of us were Buddhist converts, and the rest included a few Christians, a minuscule amount of Muslims, and Hindus. I lived in such a multi-faith environment, which was mainly dominated by Hindus in the day-to-day rituals. However, I never knew my own religious identity. I held a caste certificate on which “Mahar” is mentioned (my former caste), along with “Buddhist.” However, my brother’s caste certificate reads “Hindu-Mahar.”

Twice a year, first on the birth anniversary of Dr Ambedkar, and second on the occasion of Buddha Purnima, a full moon

night in the month of vaishak, we would wear white attire and visit Dadar chaityabhumi, Dr Ambedkar’s burial site. Images of Dr Ambedkar and a bare-shouldered, handsome picture of Gautam Buddha in his chivar hang on the wall. That was my introduction to Buddhism as a child.

The other irony is that my father, a Dalit, performed rituals as a priest in a Hindu temple in Mumbai that he and his friends started in the late 70s. It was in this context that I grew up.

Only when I started my graduate studies in social work did I come in contact with the vast literature of Dr Ambedkar, the Dalit movement and Buddhism as my religion, not merely as rituals to be performed twice a year, but as defining of my social, political and spiritual standpoint. If I am to talk of human dignity, equality and justice, I can only do this with the Buddhism Dr Ambedkar presented to us, these so-called “lesser beings.”

For 17 years of my life, I was unaware of this reading of the religion. However, the moment I could understand, it was an empowering experience. It all made sense. The poverty my grandparents, parents and I lived in was not because my folks were some inactive, lazy bunch of people living off social benefits, for there were none. But I had an explanation for the way we lived. Why didn’t we own property or land? Why didn’t my father continue education? Growing up, I just thought that was how it was, for I was trained to have a fatalistic attitude passed on to me by a hegemonic culture, which taught me not to question the way things were. What changed for me, through reading and understanding structural oppression, was how the deprivation my family and I had experienced should not be seen as an isolated fact, but as a larger structural, social problem.

I learned through movement and through Buddhism to identify the problems and not blame them on fate or the wrong doings of my past life. The scientific temper that

Ambedkarite Buddhism offered me states, “If there is a cause, there is an effect. If there is a problem, there ought to be a solution.” For me, at an individual level, this was a revolutionary revelation. It transcended myself and my belief in self—my belief that I can identify not only the problems that my family, community and society face, but that I have the potential to create solutions. In my narrative, discovering a religion with social consciousness gave me the awareness, alertness and realization that equality and justice ought to be a norm in society. This mind shift was very crucial in developing my decision-making, agency and creation of resources for my own development and those around me. Naila Kabeer defines the empowerment of women as their ability to make decisions, their sense of agency and their ability to create resources. In this light, I see my own empowerment through my educational attainment and my initiative to start an organization in the slum of Mumbai for the educational development and empowerment of Dalit youth and women.

In my individual life, a lot has changed; however, this is not very visible economically, since I am a first-generation higher education achiever and earner. However, one cannot dismiss the role of Ambedkarite Buddhism as one of the contributing factors to this change.

I would now like to move on to the narratives of the Dalit women that deeply and positively impacted me, and weave their stories with mine. These narratives are evidence for my previous claim that a socially conscientious religion contributes to the empowerment of its followers.

In the year 2009, I visited the Beed district in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra to study the factors facilitating and constraining Dalit women’s active political participation. I interviewed 20 women councilors in rural local self-government. In the year 1993, two constitutional amendments were created to facilitate the political participation of the women and

lower castes at the grassroots. The implementation of these 73rd and 74th Amendments was flawed, and many women were merely appointed as proxies by their upper caste, male counterparts. Many lower caste women were also appointed by their landlords.

But what I found to be true amongst many of the women I interviewed was that despite the social stigma of being Dalit women—despite the atrocities and threats to their lives—many women chose to not only actively contest the elections, but to make decisions as councilors. I wanted to study what was behind this active exercise of the rights and power these women were ensured by the Constitution.

Many women mentioned the support of a spouse, family and other women from the community, as well as the social movements active in their regions, as factors facilitating their participation in politics. One fact kept reappearing rather inadvertently: two women in particular mentioned how their engagement in Buddhist activities in their village helped to uplift their image within the community. Such activities included regular, disciplined prayers in Buddha vihara and the formation of women’s committees, organized weekly and monthly, with sessions on Buddhist studies and focused on readings of the Buddha and Dharma. On an individual level, this boosted their confidence within their community; it also boosted their confidence on a social level, in the way other communities began to see them as more than just Dalit women. Their self-identity as practicing Buddhist women gave them the motivation to not succumb to the inferiority imposed upon them.

After hearing that Buddhism was, in fact, a facilitating factor in the women’s active political participation, I reviewed the questions posed to the other women in the focus group discussions. Many interesting issues arose. I asked them how they saw Buddhism changing their realities on a personal level and in their political participation. A lot of them, some in their

mid 20s and others in their late forties, recalled the stories that were passed on from their grandparents about how Dr Ambedkar brought about social change by converting to Buddhism. They revered him.

I reflected: was this reverence towards Dr Ambedkar? Did worshipping him akin to a god allow these women—and all Dalits, for that matter—to value Buddhism? Have they developed an understanding and practice of Buddhism in their day-to-day life?

Then came forth in the discussion how conversion to Buddhism had changed the attitudes of their men. One woman would talk about her grandmother being the first woman to go to school, and how she faced discrimination in public squares, segregation in schools, and separate water pots. However, their newly embraced Buddhist identity had restored their dignity and unshakeable confidence. One of the grandmothers—a very mischievous one—would purposefully drink water from the pot maintained for the upper caste, and would eventually face punishment for it, but she would not stop being a rebel.

Kumud Pawade, the first female Dalit Sanskrit scholar, remembers the daily rituals from her childhood: she strikingly remembers how clean and neat she would arrive at her school. This cleanliness is also reflection of that newly gained identity as Buddhist. The psychological impurity imposed on them was long gone. This was also a dramatic change. In the lives of the first generation converts, nothing changed very much economically. However, socially, politically and spiritually they developed a positive outlook towards life.

Coming back to the women's focus group discussion, it is important to note that the women shared how the struggle of the previous generation, one of caste discrimination, is one still faced by younger women today. Now, we women strongly disagree that because we are supposedly

born into an inferior caste, we will be inferior. We refuse to believe in these arguments. We refuse to believe in the superstitions that keep us caged. We encourage our children to gain knowledge. We do not engage ourselves in discriminatory, caste-based occupations. Many of the women quoted Dr Ambedkar, and one said, "We do not want to live 100 days being a feeble goat, but live a day like a tiger." Another stated, "We believe political power will give us social inclusion." Many of the women shared about the treatment of women in Hindu society, and how, even today, they cannot talk in front of their men. The social change brought about by the religion finally helped to create spaces for these Dalit women to interact with their men on an equal footing.

As for the councilors I interviewed, most of them lived in houses built by government funds—basic facilities—and lived below the poverty line economically. But their confidence was remarkable. It can be argued that this is the true impact of the social movement, and that the social movement, in an effort to reclaim human dignity, then moved towards Buddhism. In this sense, Buddhism brought about social action in the context of Ambedkarite Buddhism.

To conclude, I would like to state here that a critical reading of religion, an understanding of why religion is needed in society, and the transformation of that religion into a driver and instrument of social change, is important. The Buddhist ideas propagated by Dr Ambedkar developed in me, and many others, such as the Dalit women, this sense of empowerment.

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Secularism and Religious Minority Rights: A Case Study of Bangladesh

Farzana Begum

Religious minority rights are important for ensuring not only that religious communities can coexist within a state, but also that individuals are treated equally, regardless of their religious beliefs. Majority groups are often in a position to impose their culture and religion upon society and politics.¹ Since minorities are not often in a position to do so, they need protection. Talal Asad contends minority rights are not derivable from general theories of citizenship: their status is connected to membership in a specific historical group, not an abstract class of citizens.² The demands for minority rights must be seen in the context of and as a response to nation building by the state. Nation building policies promote distributive justice and deliberative democracy, which might be unjust and oppressive unless supplemented by minority rights.³ Neera Chandhoke clarifies the links between justice, equality and minority rights by arguing that minority rights flow from the presuppositions of democratic egalitarianism and rights.⁴

Religious minority rights are integral to an understanding of secularism in Southeast Asia. Minority rights can be derived from the freedom of religion and conscience assured to every citizen, and which emerges from the fundamental rights guaranteed under secularism. Secularism in Southeast Asia, which is understood differently from Eurocentric understandings of secularism, ensures nondiscrimination by the elimination of persecution against individuals practicing any religion and the elimination of communalism. It also

prohibits the use of religion for political purposes. Therefore, if the rights of religious minorities are linked with secularism, then minorities are protected against discrimination, persecution and communalism. Secularism is relevant when we speak about minority rights, as it compels the state and its institutions to respect, take appropriate measures, protect and ensure the rights of the religious minorities.

What is “secularism”?

Secularism, as a principle of governance, is subject to a wide range of interpretation and understandings. Broadly, secularism is the establishment of a separation between religion and state institutions.⁵ But Talal Asad asserts secularism does not simply require separation of religion from state institutions, it presupposes notions of religion, ethics, politics and new imperatives associated with them, which organize public life.⁶ Gray Jeffrey Jacobsohn argues that in the process of modernization, various sectors of society are liberated from their domination by religion, but the emphasis on separate spheres unnecessarily obscures the diversity among regimes that aspire to be constitutionally secular. Mere separation from religion does not itself provide greater constitutional legitimacy.⁷

The modes of functioning of the separation of religion and the state are multiple but interdependent, and they cannot be characterized as separated from each other. Asad asserts that when religion intersects the public sphere, it influences politics,

¹ Neera Chandhoke, *Beyond Secularism: The Rights of Religious Minorities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

² Talal Asad, *Formation of the Secular* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

³ Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁴ Neera Chandhoke, *op.cit.*

⁵ Shahdeen Malik, *Recent Case Law on Custody and Second Marriage in Bangladesh: A Trend Towards Secularisation of the Legal System*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (1. Quartal 1995).

⁶ Talal Asad, *op.cit.*, 180.

⁷ Gray Jeffrey Jacobsohn, *The Wheel of Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 28.

education, economy etc. and plays a vital role in the development of the moral reasoning of a citizen towards a secular worldview. Thus, the separation of religion from the public sphere is not desirable. Religion can play a positive role in modern society, provided religion is willing to enter the public sphere for the purpose of addressing the moral conscience of the audience, which is to be persuaded, rather than coerced.⁸ Chandhoke, in line with Asad, asserts that instead of disassociating religion from the state, equality of all religions is preferable and fruitful for a secular society. Endorsing Ravinder Kumar, Chandhoke asserts that if we want to imagine secular society as one from which religion has been completely displaced, it would be impossible for any polity to qualify for such an aspiration.⁹

Secularism worldwide does not mean the same thing, and existing social and political realities and historical events can influence and define its meaning. While the western notion of secularism insists upon a complete separation of religion from the state, the Bangladeshi concept implies a role for religion in state affairs. In this subcontinent, specifically in Bangladesh, “secular” means a binary opposition of the communal, implying a tolerance of other religious communities.¹⁰ In Bangladesh, secularism upholds that the state shall ensure freedom of religion equally to individuals and to communities. Under secularism, no one is persecuted or discriminated against and deprived of their fundamental rights of citizenship on account of their faith. Thus, secularism safeguards minorities from the effects of communalism and the exploitation of religion for political motivation.

Secularism imperatives

When we talk about religious minorities in Bangladesh, we are taking into account

approximately 10% of the total population that consists of Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Ahamedias, Shias, Bahais and Animists.¹¹ Communal violence, which results in the burning of houses and temples, abduction, torture, killing, rape, looting, etc. poses a serious threat to the rights and existence of religious minorities. This violence also reflects their continuous struggle. Religious minorities in Bangladesh have long been methodically subjected to visible and invisible challenges, for example: threats and discrimination in their everyday lives affecting their education, trade and employment sectors, political and social affiliation, ideological and spiritual lives. Therefore, over the decades, a huge number of minorities have migrated to other countries. Those who remain generally feel unwanted in their own country.¹²

The basic principle through which religious minority rights have been articulated in the constitution of Bangladesh is that of secularism. In order to understand the crisis of minority rights in Bangladesh, one must examine the values and principles within and surrounding its constitution, as well as the role of political parties, the mass media and civil society, among others.

Bangladesh was created in 1971, following 24 years of struggle. Secularism, as a state principle, was included in its very first constitution. In the late 1970s and 1980s, the Quranic Verse “Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim” and “absolute faith and trust in the Almighty Allah” were inserted into the Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh. Islam was made the state religion and secularism was eliminated by the military rulers.

To gain political and constitutional legitimacy, the first military ruler, Major Zia, amended the Constitution by deleting

⁸ Talal Asad, *op.cit.*, 180.

⁹ Neera Chandhoke, *op.cit.*

¹⁰ Ai Riaz, *Inconvenient Truths about Bangladeshi Politics* (Prothoma Prokashan, 2012).

¹¹ “Bangladesh 2012 International Religious Freedom Report,” found at- <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/20863>.

¹² “Atrocities on Minorities in Bangladesh,” Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council, Roy Prokash, 2014.

Article 12, which propounded secularism, and by identifying the citizens as “Bangladeshi” as opposed to “Bengali.” These two identities offer two different worldviews and represent two different ideological positions. More particularly, the Bangladeshi identity underscores being Muslim rather than Bengali, which reinforces Bengali culture as the principal social marker. The battle surrounding the identity of the citizens as Bangladeshi and Bengali fragmented the polity and put activists in conflict.¹³ Zia also added Article 25(2), which articulates that the states endeavour to preserve and strengthen relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity. Moreover, Zia deleted Article 38, which prohibits the formation of religion based political parties. The emphasis on Muslim identity and frequent use of Islamic idioms created the space for adherents of Islamist ideology. The newly founded political party of Zia (Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP) brought an array of anti-secular forces into the mainstream political landscape, ranging from Jamat-e-Islam Bangladesh, who opposed the war of liberation, to those who had close connections with religious organizations.¹⁴

In 1988, the second military ruler, General Ershad, through the 8th Amendment to the Constitution declared Islam as the state religion. It was during this time the state promoted Madrassa education using huge funds from Islamic countries. The changes made by the military rulers to the Constitution thus greatly impacted the education system, the media and social structures, paving the way for the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism and communalism.

In 2011, secularism was reintroduced through the 15th Amendment to the Constitution. Article 8 of this amendment declares secularism as the fundamental principle of the state policy, and Article 12 states that secularism shall be realized by the

elimination of (a) communalism in all its forms, (b) the granting by the state of political status in favour of any religion, (c) the abuse of religion for political purposes, and (d) any discrimination against or persecution of persons practicing a particular religion.

Under Article 41, freedom of religion is provided and religious minorities are given the right to observe, preserve and propagate any religion, and to establish and administer their own educational institution. Freedom of thought and conscience is provided under Article 39, equality before the law under Article 27, prohibition on discrimination under Article 28, and opportunity of public employment under Article 29. Moreover, Article 38 stipulates that an association must not be formed that destroys the religious, social or communal harmony; that discriminates on the ground of religion, race etc.; that organizes terrorist acts or militant activities; or that has objects that are inconsistent with the Constitution.

Although the 15th Amendment affirms secularism, it avoided dropping the Quranic verse “Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim” from the Preamble of the Constitution. Also, Article 2 of the amendment retains Islam as the state religion. While Article 2 does have an addendum at the end stating that the state shall ensure equal respect and equal rights for those practicing Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity or other religions, nevertheless, it seems a mere compromise with the ideals of secularism for pro seculars. The pro seculars argue that when a state identifies itself with one particular religion, it fails to remain neutral to any other religions, and fails to implement freedom of religion in a non-discriminatory manner. Recognition of an official religion generates ample risks of discrimination and oppression against minorities. When the secular character of the Constitution and state is being questioned, presumably, minorities feel overwhelmed and insecure in their own country. On the other hand, for the anti-seculars, the deletion of the notion of “absolute faith and trust in the Almighty

¹³ Ali Riaz, *op.cit.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Allah” from the Constitution is a direct attack on the sentiments of Muslims and on Islam. The proponents of the articles, however, argue that the retention of “Bismillah” and Islam as the state religion are simply symbolic acknowledgements of the majority religion and bear no practical impact.¹⁵ The debate between pro and anti-seculars about whether the retention of “Bismillah” and state religion has changed the secular character of the Constitution raises two questions: 1) does the state’s alignment to Islam threaten the rights of religious minorities? and 2) does the ceremonial reference to Islam in the Constitution and the state’s occasional use of Islamic idioms in official statements truly reflect the secular character of the nation?

A close examination of the Constitution of Bangladesh reveals that secularism propounded in the Constitution is markedly different from the western notion of secularism. While western secularism mostly insists upon a complete separation of religion from the state, the Bangladeshi concept implies a role of religion in state affairs. Particularly in Bangladesh, the word “secular” implies a binary opposition to communalism, implying a tolerance of other religious communities. In Bangladesh, secularism or *dharmanirapekshata* means neutrality, where the state does not disassociate itself in matters relating to religion, but rather acts as a neutral agent among various religious communities to eliminate communalism. Religious neutrality for Bangladesh means the equal opportunity for all religions for state patronage and participation in public affairs.¹⁶

Article 41 of the Constitution of Bangladesh provides freedom of religion. Article 39 gives freedom of thought and conscience. Article 27 guarantees equality before law. Article 28 prohibits discrimination. Finally, Article 29 provides for opportunities of public employment for people of all faiths in

an almost similar manner to the Indian constitution; namely, there is no mention of the word “secularism.” Former Chief Justice of India Prahlad Balacharya Gajendragdhkar asserts that explicit mention of the word “secularism” was not necessary for the Indian Constitution, as the basis of Indian secularism lay in the provisions for the fundamental rights of freedom of religion and conscience.¹⁷ In line with Gajendragdhkar’s argument, the principles of secularism can be traced in the Constitution of Bangladesh from the provisions for equality, freedom of religion and non-discrimination, even if the Constitution refers to Islam as the state religion. Having a state religion does not necessarily denounce secularism and religious minority rights, since the state also grants equal status to other religions, equal rights to all citizens regardless of their religious faith, and also because the state governance is not influenced by religious leaders and institutions.

The scope of secularism

Secularism is not a political institution, but a cultural atmosphere. This means it cannot be forcibly created by any highly placed proclamation of individuals. Such a cultural atmosphere is absent in Bangladesh’s society now. In Bangladesh, secularism does not fully reflect the societal spirit, rather, it is being used as an instrument in the political field. The problem of pursuing secularism as a social reform agenda lies firstly in the fact that most of the citizens of Bangladesh perceive that secularism and minority rights were borrowed from the Indian Constitution. They feel they were meant to favour Hindu minorities, so they did not make a sincere effort to change the socio-political atmosphere. Secondly, for a majority of Bangladesh Muslims, secularism has a negative connotation attached to it. To them, secularism means lack of religion or

¹⁵ Saqeb Mahbub, *Secularism and the Constitution of Bangladesh* (Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012), 299.

¹⁶ Ali Riaz, *op.cit.*

¹⁷ Gajendragdhkar Prahlad B, *Secularism and the Constitution of India* (Bombay: University of Bombay, 1971).

irreligion, which threatens the religious identity of the people.¹⁸

The reports of print media, electronic media and the curricula of educational institutions also and at different times emphasized Islam in varying degrees, depending on the circumstances and mood of the rulers, and tacitly promoted Islamic ideology and fundamentalism. Religious fundamentalism has links within the education system, cultural activities, atrocities towards religious minorities, extremism, communal tension, violence against women and also attacks on ideological opponents. The rise of Islamist forces as prominent, legitimate political actors in the electoral process of Bangladesh follows the nationalization of Islam rather than any sympathetic gesture to any international or external ideology.¹⁹

Civil society is a resort for minority communities to stipulate their needs and demands to be negotiated with the state. Unfortunately, the civil society and social organizations of Bangladesh (lawyers, journalists, university teachers, student forums, intellectuals, cultural activists, writers and some others), which played a significant role during the language movement (and which advocated for the recognition of the Bengali language), and the creation of Bangladesh failed to uphold secular ideology in the post-independence period.

The new democratic era, which began in Bangladesh in 1991, includes the reintroduction of the parliamentary system and the regular holding of elections. However, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism is a serious threat to the peace, order and the democratic future of the country.²⁰ In Bangladesh, democracy is based on secularism, non-discrimination and equal opportunity, but communalism is adopted by political parties to gain power by dividing people. Article 12(a) states secularism to be the elimination of

communalism, but it does not define communalism, apparently making the provision ineffective. At present, there is no specific law in the country to prevent communal violence. The existing Code of Criminal Procedure 1898, Penal Code 1860 and Anti-Terrorism Act 2013 proved inadequate to combat communal strife.

Most of the political parties in Bangladesh propagate secularist views before elections since they consider the minorities to be useful vote banks. Sometimes, they even compete with one another to be in tune with the majority Muslim sentiment, which is strengthening fundamentalism and in turn posing a serious threat to the existence of religious minorities.²¹ Motivated hate speech towards minority communities is often delivered to create political instability in a particular time and place, which results in communal violence. Though Article 39 of the Constitution provides freedom of speech with some restrictions like public order and decency, no provision for group-directed hate speech exists to address communal tension.

However, the silver lining of hope can be traced in the judgment of the judiciary in matters of Muslim family law, where liberal-egalitarian paradigms are applied, rather than following Islamic norms and principles. This is suggestive that this new trend of the legal system towards secularization is indicating an emerging societal consensus concerning the role of religion in state and polity.²² Moreover, religious community, in principle, is separated from the political community as the legitimacy of the Government or public policy do not flow from religious doctrine, though personal law and religion play significant roles in the society.²³ The occasional ceremonial usage of Islamic idioms in the polity is often

¹⁸ Ali Riaz, *op.cit.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Ahmed Shafiqul Huque and Muhammad Yeahia Akhter, "The Ubiquity of Islam: Religion and Society in Bangladesh," *Pacific Affairs* Vol. 60, No. 2 (Summer, 1987), 200-22.

²² Shahdeen Malik, *op.cit.*

²³ Golam Hossain, "Islamic Elements and Democratization in Bangladesh," *Source: Oriente Moderno*, Nuova serie, Anno 23 (84), Nr. 1, Islam In South Asia (2004), 131-41.

considered as manipulation and appeasement of the majority; this is also a clear indication of the limited role of political Islam and is suggestive of the scope of secularism and the secularization of the society.

Secularism has enormous power as a breakthrough in religious dominance, and it manifests the supremacy of the secular power over religion.²⁴ Unfortunately, the principle, its challenges and the scope of secularism has not been scrutinized thoroughly for academic purposes, in the judiciary or for public or political debate, though its ideology has played a significant role in the making of Bangladesh. The birth of Bangladesh in 1971, through a nine-month liberation war, was not only a victory over the Pakistani army, but also a triumph of the pro-secular Bengali nationalistic movement over religion-frenzied Pakistani nationalism, and the first Constitution of 1972 reflects this secular spirit.²⁵ It is a fact that during the regimes of undemocratic governments, the appeal of secular ideology has faded away and faced challenges, but to assert that secularism does not reflect the societal spirit of Bangladesh is a blunder. The spirit of secularism has revived since the secular political party Awami League formed the Government, amended the Constitution and convicted the war criminals and extremists. The current debates between civil society and polity on secularism, religious minority protections and fundamentalism marks this trend.

Secularism is not an exhausted concept for the society and polity of Bangladesh, but it may need to be supplemented by other political norms or supportive measures to promote and ensure minority rights. It has the potential to eliminate communalism, redress the oppression and discrimination against minorities and to ensure the equality of all religions, instead of entirely disassociating religion from the public

sphere. But for this to happen, secularism must be supplemented with the notion of affirmative action for marginalized religious minorities, and this might include providing certain privileges to minority communities, such as a special quota in the service and in the parliament.

Conclusion

If we want to live in civility and provide all human beings with the realization of their fullness and worth, we must make sure marginalized communities are not denied their religious and cultural rights by the majority.²⁶ Secularism is one such ideal which has the potential to promote the realization of human worth and lead us to civility. In recent years, Bangladesh has experienced the impact of religious fundamentalism, communal violence on the minority communities and attack on religious minority clergy and priests by extremists. In order to overcome the problems of communalism and religious fundamentalism, to protect the rights and status of religious minorities and to establish a modern state order, the reinforcement of secular ideals with some affirmative action is an indispensable path for Bangladesh.

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²⁴ Talal Asad, *op.cit.*

²⁵ Anwar, Ali, *Dharmoiropakkotha (Secularism)* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1973).

²⁶ Neera Chandhoke, *op.cit.*

Report of the Christian-Confucian Dialogue

*Seoul and Andong, South Korea
26-31 October 2017*

A Journey in Andong

*The sage and teacher
Thought of different lands
Taught beneath one sky*

*Challenging authority
For a way to live
To respect our fellow humans.*

*Each with their own ancestral path
Embedded in words and places,
Difference in resemblance.*

*Today may we follow
And find wisdom in each,
A way of truth and harmony?*

These poetic lines capturing the essence of the paths lived by Jesus and Confucius and the challenges they pose for Christians and Confucians today in their relationships with each other were composed by Prof. Paul Hedges, Associate Professor of Interreligious Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore, during the first Christian-Confucian dialogue organized by the World Council of Churches in South Korea from 26-31 October 2017. This dialogue sought to bring an international Christian group to interact and interface with a group of Confucian scholars and traditional leaders over how Christians and Confucians can move towards greater harmony for the sake of justice and peace in today's world.

Recognizing that justice and peace become more possible when people of faiths consult rather than compete, and collaborate rather than collide, the programme on Inter-Religious Dialogue and Cooperation of the World Council of Churches organized a dialogue between Confucians and Christians on the theme "Confucians and Christians in Conversation on Justice and Peace" from 26-31 October 2017 in South Korea. The dialogue was organized in collaboration with

the Council for World Mission and the Korea Forum for Science and Life and with the support of the National Council of Churches in Korea, Sungkyunkwan University, the City of Andong and the Korea Foundation for Culture and Ethics.

The distinctiveness of the Christian-Confucian dialogue lay in its multi-modal approach whereby theological discernment and experiential engagement were integrated as a means to overcome the temptation of following a monolithic approach to dialogue. Therefore, the dialogue was organized in two parts:

A 2-day consultation in Seoul with Confucian scholars on 27 and 28 October at the Luce Center for the Global Churches, Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary, and

A 3-day immersion programme (from 29-31 October in the Andong-Yeongju region to experience authentic Confucian culture and a dialogue with leading Korean Confucians on the theme "Harmony Between Confucian Culture and Christianity" at the Dosan Seowon Confucian Academy.

The foundational basis for the dialogue was that being distinctively rooted in our respective religious traditions need not necessarily deter joint discernment but can rather deepen our thinking on and engagement with questions of justice and peace in creative and concrete ways.

A Multi-Modal Approach to Dialogue Combining Dialogue of the Heads, Heart and Hands

The first part of our meeting in Seoul enabled participants to engage in a "dialogue

of the head,” a formal dialogue of theological encounter in Seoul from some of the leading Confucian academies in Korea. Participants in this interface explored the following questions from the perspective of their own faith traditions.

- 1) What are the theological foundations for Christian-Confucian dialogue?
- 2) How would a dialogue between Confucians and Christians enrich common collaboration for promoting abundant life?
- 3) How can the coalescence of Confucian and Christian thought be foundational in concretely engendering justice and peace?

Participants had the opportunity to explore diverse topics of pertinence to Christian-Confucian relations including those relating to the scriptures, the divine, discipleship, philosophy, women and creation. The opportunity to be welcomed at Sungkyunkwan University, which was founded in 1398 and is the oldest and most important Confucian place of learning of the Joseon dynasty, and a visit to the Sungkyunkwan shrine marked the spirit of openness and welcome that characterized the event.

Professor Ioan Sauca, Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of Churches and Director of the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, in his inaugural remarks during the beginning of the theological dialogue in Seoul said, “It is for the first time that the WCC has been directly involved in initiating and organizing a Christian-Confucian dialogue. Today is a new beginning that we embrace with an openness of mind and heart.” Emphasizing how there are a significant number of WCC member churches in East Asia and North East Asia “for whom the encounter with Confucianism is part of the everyday dialogue of life,” Sauca expressed the hope that this initiative would “help engage and explore questions which are at the heart of how Christians understand the ‘self’ and engage with the ‘other’ – the question of identity as well as interrelationships.”

Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue sent his greetings on this historic occasion. Pointing out how “a culture of indifference and greed has engulfed human relationships by tarnishing reciprocity and fraternity,” Cardinal Tauran said, “We need a new and universal solidarity as well as a new dialogue to shape our future... We are convinced that things can be changed because Confucius and Jesus as well as their true followers have done so in the course of human history. Today, it is up to us to rediscover our respective spiritual treasures in order to bring a new hope to our world.”

Prof. Sang Chang, Asia President of the WCC, also brought her greetings. She expressed joy that this dialogue was taking place on Korean soil. Pointing out the importance of such dialogue in the midst of the various attempts towards reconciliation in the Korean peninsula, Chang said, “This is a timely initiative in the WCC’s pilgrimage of justice and peace. I am confident that such encounters and engagements will lead to lasting peace and the promise of healing in a broken and hurting world.”

Following the “dialogue of theological encounter” in Seoul from 27-28 October, Christian participants moved to a “dialogue of lived experience” in the important Confucian province of Andong. Christian participants had the opportunity to experience the lived reality of traditional Confucian life as guests of the direct descendants of important Confucian clans in their ancestral houses from the 29th to the 31st of October. The dialogue of the head in Seoul was further complemented by a “dialogue of the hearts” and a “dialogue of the feet” in Andong. In Andong, participants walked through the history of Confucianism as a living tradition as well as in the shoes of the Confucian brothers and sisters in Andong in the midst of the challenges that globalization has posed to Confucianism as a living tradition.

The Historic Andong Conference

On Monday, 30 October 2017, a historic conference of leaders in the Confucian

community of Andong and an internationally assembled group of Christian scholars occurred in Andong. The primary purpose of this gathering was to foster greater understanding and concord. The mayor of Andong opened the session with great hope for mutual understanding and harmony, noting existing harmony amongst various religions there. Leaders of both delegations also welcomed the participants and eloquently conveyed their conviction that more conversation between Confucians and Christians will promote better understanding, peace and cooperation, and overcome misunderstandings.

In the discussion, delegates affirmed the need to begin writing a new chapter of Christian-Confucian relations on the Korean peninsula for it is apparent that in other parts of the world, Christian-Confucian relations are harmonious, and members of both communities cooperate for the sake of the greater good of the commonwealth.

It was acknowledged that mutual understanding of similarities and respecting each other's differences will pave the way to overcome ignorance, prejudice and tension that comes from misunderstanding. Cultural differences among the peoples of the world are natural and should not necessarily lead to antagonism and hostility. Many of the most significant differences between traditions are the most beautiful and illuminating, for no one faith can adequately capture the vital essence and tremendous diversity with which God has endowed the creation.

The delegates wholeheartedly affirmed that respect for the other is foundational to dialogue and is essential to a harmonious society. Therefore, the conference called for further in-depth conversation about the philosophy/theology, traditional rituals and practices, ways of life, and worldviews of Confucians and Christians. The importance of harmony as a concept in East Asian societies, imbued with Confucian heritage, is noted.

Within this meeting, one of the important and contested areas of tension raised had to

do with ancestor veneration. With respect to that practice, Christian scholars made three initial responses at the meeting:

1) They acknowledged that there is great diversity among Christians throughout the world with regard to their remembrance and respect for their heritage and families, but the primary liturgical calendar for most of Christianity includes two festivals specifically oriented toward recalling and respecting beloved saints and ancestors: All Saints Day (November 1) and All Souls Day (November 2). Rituals vary greatly among Christians for celebrating these occasions, but it is true that many Christians pray for and venerate their departed as an essential element of their identity as Christians.

2) Christian scholars noted that there is a significant difference between the words, "worship" and "veneration."

3) Many Christians strongly believe that "worship" should be directed towards God alone. Whereas "veneration" is a term of respect and love that is broadly used; many Christian traditions regularly venerate icons and art depicting those saints who are especially significant in the history of the church. Confucian ancestor veneration may be one culturally specific way in which ancestors and significant forbears are respected, and some Christians in Confucian cultures outside Korea may follow such traditional rituals as part of their Christian way of life.

The participants acknowledged that there are contentious issues of importance to both Confucian culture and the Christian faith that have been the subject of disagreement in the Korean context, not the least the questions of ancestor veneration, of which both Confucians and Christians hold diverse convictions. The participants hoped that in the true spirit of dialogue they would continue to engage in wider discussions on these difficult questions in the future with openness and honesty and upholding the integrity of our respective faith traditions. They also recognized that the common values that bind us—namely, the seeking for harmony, peace and justice—are stronger

than those which divide Christians and Confucians. These common values offer great potential for collaboration.

What struck the participants was the spirit of openness and honesty which marked the time in Andong, especially during the course of the meeting on “Harmony Between Confucian Culture and Christianity” on Monday, 30 October 2017. Their hearts resonated with the hope for mutual understanding and harmony that the mayor of Andong expressed in his address in Andong. The Christian delegates humbly acknowledged the legendary Korean hospitality afforded to them by the Confucian community. It was a blessing and an honour to be in conversation with the Confucians and to engage with their rich heritage. They eagerly anticipate further investigation and conversation between Christians and Confucians for the sake of greater understanding, peace, justice and harmony amongst their communities.

Challenges

What happened in South Korea was a truly historic beginning! But it was only the beginning of what is hoped to be a fruitful journey towards greater understanding and harmony. The challenge of the experience in South Korea is to pave the way for this encounter to mature into long-term

engagement. There is scope and hope for this transition in the future and the Christian participants were confident that the first Christian-Confucian dialogue is a small step to move towards cooperation and collaboration which will help foster a world in which the values that Christians and Confucians deeply cherish—namely harmony, peace and justice — will thrive.

In a context where it is increasingly clear that it is all the more necessary for the various religious traditions to engage in a common search and common struggles for justice this consultation was a timely and important intervention, especially in the context of Korea. However, given that this was a beginning, the dialogue was meant to be a bridge-building exercise with the main objective at this stage being to build mutual trust and respect. The expectation is that this dialogue will be the beginning of several dialogical encounters which will lead to better understanding between the two religions, respecting each other’s differences and overcoming fears and prejudices of the other. In many ways this event was a process where participants will not be judged by the harvest reaped but by the seeds that were planted—the seeds of mutual respect, trust and hospitality.

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