



57 CURRENT DIALOGUE

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Multiple Religious Belonging: Exploring Hybridity, Embracing Hospitality

Editorial	
Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar	2
Multiple Religious Belonging and Interreligious Dialogue	
Catherine Cornille	4
Multiple Religious Belonging: Some Observations	
J. Jayakiran Sebastian	9
Bidden or Unbidden and Always Blessed	
James Christie	14
Multiple Religious Belonging and Churches in the USA	
Antonios Kireopoulos	19
Exploring Religious Hybridity and Embracing Hospitality	
Karen Hamilton	23
From Adherence to Affinity: Multiple Religious Belonging in Hawai'i	
Charles Buck	25
To Encourage You to Create	
Carmen Gonzalez-McKernie	29
Learning to Sail: My Interfaith Life as a Buddhist Christian	
Peter Illgenfritz	33
A Divine Economy	
Joyce Shin	36
Interrogating the Idea of Hybridity from an Interfaith Perspective	
Israel Selvanayagam	41
Hybridity: A Personal Reflection	
Alan Amos	50
North East Tribal Christianity and Traditional Practices	
Lovely Awomi James	52
Body Discourse in I Corinthians: Exploring Hybridity and Embracing Hospitality	
K. Balakrishnan	63
Reading Ruth Interreligiously	
Clare Amos	72
Practicing Multiple Religious Belonging for Liberation: A Dalit Perspective	
Joshua Samuel	78
Marga-Darshan: Horizons and Hopes for Christians and Hindus	88
Book Review	90

Editorial

Being “religious interreligiously” in an increasingly pluralistic world is an area pregnant with more questions than we have learnt to ask. 2015 has been an exciting year of engaging with some of the questions that are cardinal for interreligious dialogue. In our last issue of *Current Dialogue* my colleague Dr Clare Amos mentioned about the completion of the report “Who Do We Say That We Are? Christian Identity in a Multi Religious World” which engages the question of Christian identity. A study guide to accompany the report has now been prepared by a small group and is soon to be published. It is hoped that this will be a study resource for the churches. One further question that the WCC’s programme on Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation took up last year was the often blurred boundaries between interreligious dialogue and intra-Christian (ecumenical dialogue). The fruit of discussions around this question is a booklet that is due to be published soon.

This issue of *Current Dialogue* deals with an important question that the WCC has been engaged in addressing – the question of religious hybridity as expressed in a phenomenon often known as multiple religious belonging or dual belonging. Participation or identification with the practices and beliefs of more than one religious tradition and hybridization of beliefs is intrinsic to several religious traditions and Christianity has been no exception in this regard. However, insufficient reflection has been done on the theological and pastoral challenges of this phenomenon from the point of view of the churches.

Recognizing that the time is opportune for churches to engage with this vexing question, the programme on interreligious dialogue has initiated a process of discernment, dialogue and debate on the question of multiple religious belonging. A pilot consultation focusing on the theme “Exploring Hybridity, Embracing Hospitality from an Asian Perspective” was organized in Chennai, India in October 2014 in collaboration with the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute. The stimulating theological reflections that arose at the meeting confirmed the need to take up further discussions on this theme at the global level. The Chennai consultation was followed up with a consultation in Cleveland, Ohio in collaboration with the United Church of Christ in April 2015 focusing on the North American context. The Cleveland consultation threw light on the bewildering diversity of this phenomenon and brought home the need for further engagement with this phenomenon from the perspective of the churches.

This issue of *Current Dialogue* thus brings together reflections on multiple religious belonging from scholars invited to contribute on this theme and includes some presentations from the Chennai and Cleveland consultations. A book of essays on the theme of multiple religious belonging is also due to be published by the end of this year. Further consultations on the theme are planned for other regions as well. Needless to say, multiple religious belonging unsettles the sure foundations of Christian identity, mission and interreligious dialogue where identity is often understood in rigid and binary terms vis-à-vis other religions. Therefore, the hope is that these planned consultations on the theme would help the WCC develop perspectives on multiple religious belonging from inter-cultural, inter-regional and inter-generational perspectives. Watch this space!

In a world in which Jonathan Swift’s often-quoted words “we have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another” seem increasingly applicable there is need to engage with the question of Religion and Violence. This year’s Youth In Asia Training for Religious Amity (YATRA) a programme initiated by the WCC for young ecumenical leaders from member churches in Asia dealt with this pertinent question. YATRA 2015, with its theme “In God’s Name: Religions Resourcing and Resisting Violence” enabled 24 young men and women to reflect in depth on the question of religion and violence in Siem Reap, Cambodia. The

theme “Religion and Violence” focusing on religious fundamentalism will also be the theme for a major conference to be held in February 2016 which will commemorate 50 years of *Nostra Aetate*.

The WCC’s work on interreligious dialogue has also touched on questions of inequality and discrimination so that interreligious dialogue and cooperation contributes to the WCC’s on-going focus on a “Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace”. The Bossey Institute’s Building an Interfaith Community course this year focused on the theme “Wealth and Poverty in Judaism, Christianity and Islam”, an area associated with questions of inequality, ethics and deprivation. In July, a Christian-Buddhist consultation on the theme “En-Gendering Justice: Christians in Conversation with Buddhists on Religion, Gender, Sexuality and Power” explored the relationship between religion and gender from an interreligious perspective. It is our conviction that interreligious dialogue will become a dialogue of life in all its fullness only if it touches upon contentious issues which are critical to the wholeness and well-being of the *oikoumene* – the whole inhabited earth. In that conviction we carry out our programmatic work as small steps in the pilgrimage of justice and peace. This issue of *Current Dialogue* testifies to one such step!

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

Multiple Religious Belonging and Interreligious Dialogue

Catherine Cornille

Exposure to the reality of religious diversity and knowledge of the teachings and practices of different religions has brought about shifts in the sense of religious identity and belonging. Rather than fully identifying with one particular religion, a growing number of individuals have come to claim to belong to various religious traditions. In many cases, this involves cradle Christians who are also drawn to certain schools of Buddhism or Hinduism. While some identify predominantly with one tradition and partly with another, others find themselves between traditions, moving back and forth between the normativity of one or the other in various aspects of faith and practice. The expression “multiple religious belonging” thus refers to various kinds and degrees of belonging to more than one religion and reflection on its implications for Christian churches and for interreligious dialogue thus requires some clarification and differentiation of the phenomenon.

Types of Multiple Belonging

It is first of all important to distinguish involuntary and voluntary forms of multiple religious belonging. There are certain contexts in which belonging to more than one religion is a social and cultural given, rather than a choice. This is the case, for example, in East Asia, where being Chinese traditionally meant belonging to Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, or where being Japanese involved participation in both Buddhist and Shinto rituals, in addition to whatever other religion one might adopt. In so far as these cultures were shaped by different religions, which each came to focus on certain specialized religious functions, multiple religious belonging was simply a matter of cultural identity. Another involuntary form of multiple belonging may be found where individuals are born to parents who each practice a different religion. While children born in these multi-

religious families may be raised primarily in one or the other religion, the religions of both parents inevitably leave some mark on their identity. These involuntary forms of multiple religious belonging require various forms of negotiation and compromise on the part of the individuals and the religions involved. However, they do not pose a fundamental challenge to the self-understanding of the religions, since the reality of belonging to different religions is dictated by external circumstances, rather than by internal desire or necessity.

This is different in the case of voluntary multiple religious belonging. Here, individuals willingly identify with other religions, either temporarily or more permanently. In the first instance, this involves a passing participation in certain ritual or other religious practices. Throughout history, individuals facing pressing crises or needs have come to seek recourse for their problems with sources of religious potency, regardless of their particular religious affiliation. As such, Christians have visited Hindu shrines to solve problems of fertility, while Hindus have visited Christian churches to procure other blessings and various types of healing. When disease strikes, many African Christians visit traditional African healers while Brazilian Christians seek recourse in the Orishas of Candomble. These types of multiple religious belonging, however, often end when the immediate problem or need subsides.

However, in the encounter with diverse religious options, individuals may also come to identify more permanently with more than one religion. In the West, this often takes the form of Buddhist-Christian dual belonging¹, but it may in principle apply to any two or more religious traditions. A famous example of this is Raimon Panikkar, who declared about his journey into other religions that “I

started as a Christian, I discovered I was a Hindu, and returned as a Buddhist without ceasing to be a Christian.” But many other Christians have been drawn to other religious traditions without denying their Christian faith or fully converting to the other tradition. In many cases, this experience of dual or multiple belonging involves the appropriation of elements from various religious traditions without attempting to completely live up to the self-understanding of each. Often, one tradition remains dominant and the norm for selecting and interpreting particular teachings and elements from other religions. For example, Christians practicing Zen Buddhism have often been viewed as sitting on a “Christian pillow” or as interpreting the experience of Zen from a Christian perspective.² In these cases, one may question the use of the term multiple belonging, since individuals tend to still belong primarily to one religion or are not intent to live up to the criteria for belonging as stipulated by each of the traditions.

There are cases, however, where individuals find themselves genuinely divided between two traditions in a desire to belong fully to both. Some even undergo initiation rituals in different religions. This is the case, for example, with Paul Knitter, who, while a baptised Christian and former priest, also took refuge in the three jewels of Buddhism, or with Robert Kennedy who is both a Jesuit priest and a Zen Roshi and Kevin Hunt, who is a Trappist monk and a Zen Roshi. Here, multiple belonging thus involves not merely membership, but leadership in more than one religion. Justification for such multiple belonging tends to be sought in the idea of the transcendent unity of religions, or in the belief that all religious teachings and practices finally lead to the same ineffable ultimate reality.

An interesting borderline form of multiple belonging may be found in individuals who identify primarily with the symbolic and scriptural framework of one religion, and with the hermeneutical framework of another. Such is the case, for example, with the attempts to reinterpret Christian faith

through the worldview and categories of Advaita Vedanta or Madhyamika.³ It is based on the idea of the contingency of the Greek philosophical framework in which Christianity was originally expressed and on the need to experiment with alternate philosophical systems in order to deepen and expand the Christian faith and render it more truly universal. Whether this is a form of inculturation and expansion of Christian theology, or an expression of multiple religious belonging will depend on the possibility and limits of interpreting Christianity through alternate philosophical frameworks, and on the particular relationship between a religious and particular philosophical worldview.

Christianity and Multiple Belonging

The phenomenon of multiple belonging forms a genuine challenge to Christian churches. The need or desire to affiliate with religions other than Christianity seems to suggest a certain insufficiency or lack in Christian teachings and practices. In so far as a particular need seems to be recurrent, it challenges the churches to explore ways of addressing this in the tradition itself. But the challenge may also involve a lessening of attachment or commitment to Christianity and a “spiritualizing” of the faith. And this runs counter to the self-understanding of the tradition.

While multiple religious belonging tends to be viewed from the perspective of the subject who claims identification with more than one religion, all religious belonging involves an interplay between a personal or subjective identification with a particular religion, and an objective, institutional or communal confirmation of that identity. As such, the self-understanding of different religions needs to be taken into consideration in claims to multiple belonging.

Like most religious traditions, Christianity lays claim to possessing the ultimate or highest truth and to providing an unequivocal path to salvation. In so far as no two religious traditions are perfectly

compatible, and in fact often advance conflicting claims to truth, belonging to Christianity logically excludes belonging simultaneously and equally to another religious tradition. Even within Christianity, the claim to be both Protestant and Catholic would also make little sense, since they propose certain logically incompatible interpretations of Christian faith. In addition, belonging to Christianity or, say, a Baptist Christian church, involves a way of life and a set of practical commitments which cannot be fully observed while also obeying the requirements set by another Christian church, let alone another religion.

In order to come to terms with conflicting truth claims, practitioners of multiple belonging usually resort to the idea of a transcendent and apophatic unity of religions. This pluralist approach to religious diversity, while appealing to some, does not readily coincide with the self-understanding of most Christian churches. While Christianity does indeed recognize the apophatic or ineffable nature of the ultimate reality itself, it also insists on the unique truth and efficacy of its teachings and practices in attaining to this ultimate reality and goal. As such, the contents of one's beliefs and actions do matter and thus do the possible conflicting claims to truth.

Individuals who practice multiple belonging also advance the argument that there are varying degrees of commitment and participation in each religion and that religious belonging should not be judged according to the highest standards or to the most fully engaged and committed. However, neither can one's belief in a religion start from the model of half-hearted commitment. While it is true that most religions admit of different levels of belonging, the ideal is still that of full surrender and commitment to all of the teachings and practices, and belonging to a tradition is understood as at least striving to that ideal. Whereas this is often viewed as an expression of religious possessiveness and jealousy, it may also be seen as the requirement, set by all religions, of reaching

the highest goal. As such, multiple religious belonging runs against the self-understanding of Christianity, as of most other religions.

Multiple Belonging and Interreligious Dialogue

While full multiple religious belonging thus represents a contradiction in terms, it is not without relevance or interest for the process of interreligious dialogue. First, the term "multiple religious belonging" in the broadest sense is used for individuals who identify in varying degrees with more than one religion. In so far as it is used to refer to individuals who belong primarily to one religion but identify partially with elements from another religion, it may be seen to be operative in most forms of constructive interreligious dialogue or comparative theology. Such dialogue requires grounding in a particular religion.⁴ But it also arises from genuine interest in the particular teachings and practices of another religion. The comparative theological exercise then consists in an attempt to learn from those teachings or practices in order to enhance or expand one's religion's self-understanding. Here, one tradition thus remains dominant, providing the basis or norm for integrating elements from the other religion.

One may debate the question as to which is the dominant tradition of those who identify with a Christian symbolic and a Madhyamika hermeneutical framework. In so far as the former represents the contents and the latter merely a framework for interpretation, Christianity may still be regarded as the normative tradition. However, to the extent that Madhyamika is itself profoundly shaped by Buddhist teachings, a wholesale reinterpretation of Christianity in those terms may amount to an (implicit or explicit) assent to Buddhism as one's primary or normative religion. This is a question which is open to further theological reflection and discussion.

Even though actual multiple belongers should no longer speak authoritatively from or for a particular religious tradition, they

may still contribute to the dialogue between religions.

First, they may point to some of the religious deficiencies or unmet religious and spiritual needs which propel individuals to seek recourse in other religions, or which render full belonging to one particular religion impossible. As such, they provide an important critical function. But second, they may also contribute more constructively to the process of dialogue in so far as they may become a source of inspiration or critical touchstone for those engaged in more systematic interreligious dialogue. Michael Amaladoss thus speaks of multiple belongers as “liminal” figures, who “exist on the border between two communities and their symbolic universes, feeling at ease within both, and who experience solidarity with each of the two communities.”⁵ A powerful example of this is the French Benedictine monk Henri Le Saux, or Abhishiktananda, whose journal and other writings provide a lively testimony to the difficulty of fully belonging to two traditions, as well as to its important bridging function. In a letter to a friend about the challenges of identifying with both Christianity and Hinduism, he writes:

I know something about this myself, living as I do half with the established church and half with those who possess nothing, half with Christians and half with Hindus – a very uncomfortable situation, believe me! It is here that I find your point about the “bridge” very illuminating. It is precisely the fact of being a bridge that makes this uncomfortable situation worthwhile. The world, at every level, needs such bridges. If, to be a Hindu with the Hindus, I had become a complete sannyasi, I would have been unable to communicate either the Hindu message to Christians or the Christian message to Hindus. ... However, the danger of this life as a “bridge” is that we run the risk of not belonging finally to either side; whereas, however harrowing it may be, our duty is precisely to belong wholly to both sides. This is only possible in the mystery of God.⁶

Abhishiktananda is thus clearly aware of the theological and practical difficulties of belonging to two traditions. In a letter to Raimon Panikkar, he speaks of the

experience of feeling “lacerated even physically”⁷ by the dual summons of Hinduism and Christianity. This should represent a warning against any easy assumption that one can belong fully to two traditions. But his work also represents an inspiration for other Christians interested in learning from the Hindu tradition, and a fearless testing of the boundaries between the two traditions.

Conclusion

The expression “multiple religious belonging” covers a very broad phenomenon ranging from claims to fully belong to two traditions to primary belonging to one religion and partial identification with another. Even though full multiple belonging does not make sense from a Christian perspective, I have argued that partial identification with another religious tradition is desirable, if not necessary for constructive dialogue with other religions. It is only through being deeply moved or genuinely convinced by a teaching or practice of another tradition that one will try to integrate it within one’s own tradition not only for one’s own sake, but in order to enrich the tradition as a whole. Though the use of a common term points to the reality of a continuity and variation in degrees of belonging to more than one religion, it might be helpful to develop a different terminology for those who do and those who do not adhere to one dominant or normative tradition.

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¹ In *Buddhist and Christian? An Exploration of Dual Belonging* (London: Routledge, 2011) Rose Drew takes stock of the ways in which some prominent Christian thinkers have come to argue for the possibility of such dual belonging.

² William Johnston, *The Still Point: Reflections on Zen and Christian Mysticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1970), 77; Roger Corless, “The Mutual Fulfillment of Buddhism and Christianity in Co-Inherent Superconsciousness”, in Ingram and Streng (eds.), *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 133; Winston King, “Buddhist-Christian Dialogue Reconsidered”, in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 2 (1982), 8-9.

³ For an example of a Madhyamika reinterpretation of Christianity, see John Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahayana Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989) or *I Am/No Self:*

A Christian Commentary on the Heart Sutra (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2012). For an example of a reinterpretation of Christianity through Advaita Vedanta, see Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010).

⁴ See my book, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Crossroads, 2008), 59-94.

⁵ “Le double appartenance religieuse” in D. Gira and J. Scheuer (eds.), *Vivre de plusieurs religions: Promesse ou illusion?* (Paris: Les Editions de l’Atelier, 2000), 52.

⁶ Letter to Ann-Marie Stokes, 1967, quoted in Abhishiktananda, and S. Du Boulay, *Essential Writings* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 87.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

Multiple Religious Belongings: Some Observations

J. Jayakiran Sebastian

Introduction

Recognizing that human beings have paradoxically oscillated between claims of exclusive religious belonging, to claims of being inclusive and/or plural (with the subtle shades of all that such belonging entails), to claiming that spirituality and religion are not to be confused and that one could be spiritual but not belong anywhere religiously, to embracing the “fruit salad” image of taking things from here and there in an eclectic, but personally fulfilling manner, to assertions of a mosaic that informs the religious identity of individual persons and communities, I believe that an opportunity to look afresh at some of these things is a welcome opening to interrogate some of these claims. In what follows, I offer some observations on these and related matters, through a look at the early church and contemporary Dalit realities, with the hope that a meaningful and timely conversation will ensue.

A Look Back: Religious Belonging Then

A brand new journal published by Mohr Siebeck called *Religion in the Roman Empire* has the goal of stimulating “the development of an approach which can comprise the local and global trajectories of the multi-dimensional pluralistic religions of antiquity.” What I find interesting in this is not just the “pluralistic religions of antiquity”, but the reality that those living in this period could – in the words of the theme of the inaugural volume – embody “Individual Appropriation of Lived Ancient Religion.”¹ The editorial outlines the rationale and thinking behind the launch of this new journal, and after discussing religions in the Roman Empire it turns to Christianity:

The study of early Christianity has often focussed on patristic, apostolic, apocryphal, and apologetic literature that has been preserved and promoted by a

Christianity that had already become the state religion of Roman Empire in late antiquity. Hence, it often suffers from methodological circularity, namely the anachronistically presupposed canonical sources and, based on them, its methodological framework, hardly recognizing that both are only the results and not the norms of the development they are supposed to investigate.²

It is true that what we find commented on here, “methodological circularity”, is also something that we can use in turning to attempts to understand religious belonging amidst the messiness of everyday life even today. Have we attributed “official” ways of belonging, judged through rituals, determined by membership claims, and based on self-reported data to slot people into rather well-defined spaces? Have we made room to recognize the reality that the religious life of human beings is not only complex, but multiform, and that the normalization of hybridity may be not only the defining feature of understanding life in the 21st century, but also the reality down the ages – a reality that needs to be recognized for what it is?

There is one more example coming from the time of the early church. Protesting against a simplistic model of “us versus them” and applying this to the study of Christian martyrdom and the attitude of those groups that have been grouped under the problematic “umbrella” term, Gnostics, it has been pointed out that “what is needed is to move beyond dichotomies while throwing our analytical nets much wider, so as to recognize the greater complexity and nuance of identity forming endeavors at work in these early centuries.”³ This observation is important in our on-going conversation about interfaith realities and changing patterns of family and societal life today, where traffic across artificially constructed barriers seems to be a given, since we need to reckon with the fact that

some of these barriers were recognized as being artificial even in past millennia.

Returning to the methodological questions raised by the editors of the new journal, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, we read:

*While this framework identifies Christianity with the political, cultural and institutional units it is operating in – conceptualized as Roman, Western or Eastern Christianity etc. – it presupposed ascriptions of religious and collective identities as well as fixed structures of Christian life (baptism, the Eucharist and the weekly and annual rites) which need to be questioned rather than taken for granted.*⁴

The editors are absolutely spot on in their comment that “fixed structures” should not be taken as a given, but should be interrogated, problematized, and analyzed, and I believe that the attribution of an exclusive form of believing and belonging comes from a totalizing desire for clear and unambiguous boundaries, that, in reality, are unlikely to exist, and the nature of such porous boundaries need to be acknowledged.

Porous Boundaries and Dialogical Realities: Religious Belonging Now

The huge number of documents, insights, reports, and analysis generated by dialogue programmes worldwide – ranging from the great conferences organized over the years by the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity; the reception by the churches of documents like “Guidelines on Dialogue” in its various forms; and the trickle-down of this at the level of National Councils of Churches, bilateral dialogues, interfaith groups, local congregations, and “mission statements” – all of these cannot be lost down the ecumenical memory hole or relegated to the vagaries of “it’s all available on the Internet” or “you can find it stored here in our library.” They must instead receive a fresh lease of life so that these brittle pages will flutter again and black words on white paper can continue to inspire, instruct, challenge and critique the situation in which we are

today. We cannot be those who regret the loss of ecumenical memory, but be the ones who foster, nourish, draw from, and enliven these memories and contributions. One of the things that should receive more attention is that in this voluminous documentation, one finds a richly suggestive and often painfully honest wrestling with questions of religious belonging.

As one example, let us take the wrestling with “syncretism” that has often plagued and brought to a shuddering halt many attempts to explore the nature of religious belonging. Already in 1979, in the famous “Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies” document – a document subsequently addressed, modified, and revisited – we read:

*Within the ecumenical movement the practice of dialogue and the giving of witness have sometimes evoked mutual suspicion. God is very patient with the Church, giving it space and time for discovery of His way and its riches (cf. II Pet. 3:9). There is need within the ecumenical fellowship to give one another space and time – space and time, for instance, in India or Ghana to explore the richness of the Gospel in a setting very different from that of “Hellenized” Europe; space and time, for instance, in Korea to develop the present striking evangelistic work of the churches; space and time, for instance, in Europe to adjust to a new situation in which secularity is now being changed by new religious interest not expressed in traditional terms. The diversity of dialogue itself must be recognized in its particular content and in its relation to specific contexts.*⁵

Given the reality that in places like India, the laboratory of dialogue, where all kinds of exciting things have and continue to happen, but also the place where horrible and destructive explosions have led to the tragic loss of life throughout her history, we need to understand that while attempts to look for certain commonalities and a shared vocabulary are all welcome and worthy pursuits, the honest interrogation of difference, perceptions of history, understandings of identity, limits of “toleration”, and the majority-minority

questions, along with the reality of believing and belonging, are all issues and themes that need renewed and concentrated attention today. The search for the lowest common denominator or the “essentials”, while well-intended, seems to me to be misguided, and an honest recounting and interrogation of difference is an unrelenting and pressing task. What I find interesting is that when one unpacks concepts like the “diversity of dialogue”, one must reckon with the diversity of those who as individuals are often overlooked in discourses that tend to think in broad and almost comprehensive categories, rather than as much smaller units going down to the individual level. To understand such a concept one must engage in a process that unflinchingly reckons with how individuals construct themselves religiously, not in a monolithic manner, but as those who have chosen to inhabit multiple religious worlds with varying degrees of comfort and security.

This is best illustrated by the burgeoning literature that seeks to analyze the religious experiences of Dalit people in India. This field has opened up rich possibilities for interrogating the pain and pathos, as well as the hope for liberation that comes through multiple religious belonging, some parts of which have been deemed by the hegemonic forces as being “determined” and “destined” and other aspects that seemingly offer emancipatory possibilities, but, often in practice, have proved to be phantasmagorical in essence and reality. The essays in a major book edited by Sathianathan Clarke, Deenabandhu Manchala and Philip Vinod Peacock, *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-First Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways* contains very significant contributions that, in various ways and at a variety of levels, problematize the question of identity and identity formation, forced or chosen. In one essay, Clarke and Peacock note: “Humans are both blessed and cursed by their dialogic nature – their tendency to encompass a number of views in virtual simultaneity and tension, regardless of their logical compatibility.”⁶

The writers go on to point out that for Dalits, “the predicament to live out of the human dialogic nature involves mediating between the hegemonic realities that seek to constitute identities and liberative privilege that wills to somewhat deliberately construct authentic identification.”⁷ This reality is even more striking when it comes to the experiences of Dalit women, where through the

*[...] construction of approved identities of “subordination”, the larger and centralized Hindutva, the saffronization and Sanskritization at work, all form the blueprint that manipulate Dalit lifestyles. For Dalit women, the victims of triple injustices and dual patriarchies, this cast(e)rated encroachment of their cultural avenues causes the sum of net risks due to Hindutva grow exponentially.*⁸

This area of religious belonging and the ability of Dalit women to not only endure but prevail in the midst of such challenges should be taken seriously and the resources employed appreciated and valourized.

A methodological point must be made here. We have to recognize that we often conflate two things inter-denominational or ecumenical belonging and interreligious or interfaith boundary crossing. There are questions surrounding the interconnections of these belongings, and I would like to say that I have noticed easy slippages but also substantial overlap in terms of approaches and outcomes. Slippages include the supposition that there is something “same” about the undertaking, be it ecumenical or interfaith, which can lead to hasty generalizations and quick assumptions. Unless there is a substantial amount of “tidying-up” that is done when handling the mass of data that we have on ecumenical questions, we risk carrying disentangled baggage into the broader work of interfaith interaction and the analysis of multiple religious empowerment. Stanley Samartha subtitled one of his books *Ecumenical Issues in Inter-Religious Relationships*⁹, thus pointing to the mutuality as well as the distinctiveness. This is not to say that in ecumenical

endeavours there is some precise way in which certain things have to be done, sorted out, neatly packaged, and then used as a stepping stone into interreligious work. But there is much to be done in terms of calmly, soberly, sincerely, and humbly recognizing where we are in inter-denominational ecumenical dialogue. I also recognize that this can be a two-way street, where such comments can be made about the huge quantity of qualitative experiences and what all these mean to the ecumenical quest, but a re-appreciation of the undoubted gains of the ecumenical movement, as well as an honest and sober recognition of the roadblocks in the last one hundred years will be of salutary benefit to the broader dialogical enterprise.

Conclusion: Multiple Religious Belonging in Liberative Christological Terms

In an attempt to move beyond a perceived impasse regarding the “practical liberation of Dalits”, Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar writes that “Not setting liberative agendas can act as corrosives for Dalit commitment to liberation as it creates the illusion that there is nothing to work towards.”¹⁰ This is a crucial point because without an emancipatory agenda, one would be left with platitudes and dry and sterile data. Grappling with multiple religious belonging is not a betrayal of our commitment to a particular faith, but a deepening and broadening of it; it is a process undertaken by those who are prepared to engage and practice risky Christology. Take, for example, the concept of liberation that has had such an impact on ecumenical and interfaith thinking for the last many decades. When applied to contemporary Dalit movements, a perceptive commentator notes that

[...] identity politics favored by Dalit groups have only resulted in fragmentation, thus distorting the agenda of emancipation. However muddled and complex the situation may be, the fact remains that the goals of all labouring masses are entangled. The real challenge lies in building solidarity without

*dissolving the specific concerns and differences of all the groups involved.*¹¹

This is an important challenge that prevents us from giving in to despair with regard to what seems to be narrow individualism with multiple foci, preventing the actualization of attempts at honest solidarity. Peniel Rajkumar goes on to write:

*Interrelationality, in fact, allows for a means of both evading the duplication of binary categories of the past as well as constructing new anti-monolithic models of exchange which promote new and affirmative versions of existence.*¹²

This call for interrelationality means coming to terms with the rich complexity and glorious simplicity of the message of the man from Galilee, which should not be an embarrassment, but a question of returning to our roots and our existence. Christianity without dialogue regarding who we are; where we have come from; what it is that we have inherited; how things have been ingrained in us by certain forces; and how we are negotiating the opportunities and challenges of a technologically connected yet fragmented society is like a road without a map; a quest without a destination; and a journey without a goal. Recognizing our undoubted manyness – even the manyness of interrelationality within us – in our multiple religious belonging helps us on our journey forward. On this journey, the recognition of who we are religiously is not a betrayal of our commitment, rather it helps us to draw a map, define our destination, and be alerted to the goal. And on this journey our engagement with, and openness towards, the person and work of Christ continues to have bearing upon our life, work, and witness.

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¹ “Editorial” in J. Rupke et al. (eds.), *Religion in the Roman Empire* Vol. 1 No. 1 (March 2015).

² *Ibid.*, 6.

³ Philip L. Tite, “Voluntary Martyrdom and Gnosticism” in *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Spring 2015), 27-54.

⁴ J. Rupke et al., *Religion in the Roman Empire*, 6.

⁵ WCC, *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1979), 15.

⁶ S. Clark, D. Manchala and P. Peacock, “Dalits and Religious Conversion: Slippery Identities and Shrewd Identifications” in *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-First Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 179-195.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁸ Meena Kandasamy, “Between Her Legs: Hindutva and Dalit Women” in Anand Teltumbde (ed.), *Hindutva and Dalits: Perspectives for Understanding Communal Praxis* (Kolkata: Samya, 2005), 108-135.

⁹ S. J. Samartha, *Courage for Dialogue: Ecumenical Issues in Inter-Religious Relationships* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1981).

¹⁰ Peniel Rajkumar, “The Diversity and Dialectics of Dalit Dissent and Implications for a Dalit Theology of Liberation” in Clarke, Manchala and Peacock (eds.), *op. cit.*, 69.

¹¹ V. S. Sreedhara, “Human Rights, Dalit Questions and Subaltern Studies in India” in Ashok K. Pankaj and Ajit K. Pandey (eds.), *Subalternity, Exclusion and Social Change in India* (New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2014), 98.

¹² Peniel Rajkumar, “The Diversity and Dialectics of Dalit Dissent and Implications for a Dalit Theology of Liberation” in Clarke, Manchala and Peacock (eds.), *op. cit.*, 70.

Bidden or Unbidden and Always Blessed

James Christie

The following papers by James Christie, Antonios Kereopoulos, Karen Hamilton and Charles Buck were presented at the Consultation on Multiple Religious Belonging organised by the World Council of Churches and United Church of Christ in Cleveland, Ohio in April 2015. This consultation explored the concept of multiple religious belonging in the light of lived experiences and facilitated reflection on how churches can respond to it from pastoral and theological perspectives.

“Story is to religion as math is to science.”
—James Christie

Introduction

Once upon a time, I was minister of the rather unusually named St. James Bond United Church in Toronto, Canada. The story of the church’s name merits telling but on some other occasion. While serving there as Senior Minister, I, and subsequently my colleague, Dr Karen Hamilton, who is now the General Secretary of the Canadian Council of Churches, found ourselves challenged by a liturgical moment which pushed the boundaries of liturgical and ecclesial convention.

In the early 1990s, in the midst of the Balkan conflict, St. James Bond sponsored two refugee families fleeing the violence of the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. In each case, the families consisted of a Muslim husband, a Christian wife, and young children, the children raised in the Christian tradition.

The families were warmly received by the church community, and swiftly became beloved friends and neighbours. To my knowledge, no pressure, explicit or implicit, was ever exerted on the families concerning religious practice or faith stance. They regularly attended worship gatherings,

mainly, it seemed, as opportunities to engage with the community.

Then, something happened; something unprecedented. One Sunday morning, on which the Eucharist was to be celebrated, congregants were invited to come forward to the communion rail to receive the elements from the minister and elders presiding. Up came the new Canadian blended Muslim and Christian families: all of them, including the two Muslim men. The men held their hands out in the manner of their wives, children and neighbours, awaiting the elements.

What to do . . . ?

Let us credit the Holy Spirit. With but a heartbeat of hesitation, I gave the bread to our Muslim brothers. The Elder proffered the cup. The moment passed into eternity.

At the time, I recall thinking that I would rather be chastised by the Church for including at Christ’s table a child of God who our Lord loves but who hardly conformed to ecclesial custom, than to be chastised at some moment in the *eschaton* by our Lord for excluding one of God’s own, albeit unbaptized and of another faith. More recently I have wondered whether this incident was my introduction to the emerging world of multi-religious families and multi-religious belonging. Either way, I believe God was present.

“Bidden or Unbidden”

Carved into the lintel of the main entryway to Carl Gustav Jung’s iconic tower near Zurich, Switzerland, is the mantra “Bidden or unbidden, God is present.” Everything in the realm of interreligious or, for that matter, intra-religious conversation and dialogue hinges upon that foundational

premise. If there is a God, including the highly personal and demanding deity of the Tanakh, Gospel and Qur'an, then that God must be present to some degree in all faiths; and to the fullest extent possible to all peoples, regardless of faith tradition.

Exclusionary theology of any kind must surely be to both the rational and faithful alike, an oxymoron. To the honest practitioner of that often esoteric art and discipline, theology must inevitably be speculative. If it is not, then it slips swiftly and inevitably into the realm of the psychotic. If this is so, then the question of multi-religious belonging offers significant scope for theological speculation in this still young century.

We must, of course, proceed with caution. The risk of a sort of religious imperialism is devoutly to be avoided. One recalls the waggish tale of a one-time Jewish Mayor of Belfast who was accosted by a gang of ruffians during the troubles. The thugs demanded to know whether the mayor was a Catholic or a Protestant. In high dudgeon, he replied that he was neither, but rather, Jewish. Taken aback, his antagonists withdrew to consider, returning but a short while later to respond, "All roight, we'll grant ye're a Jew, but are ye a Protestant Jew or a Catholic Jew?"

But granted reasonable caution, the two questions for theologians of all traditions are: "What is God doing?" and "Where is God going?" In this context, one must add the question, "Does multi-religious belonging figure into the divine equation?"

I sense that it does.

"Acting our Way into a New Way of Thinking"

The questions raised above are, of course, speculative; but they are not purely theoretical. While the average "spell check" programme is blissfully ignorant of the term multi-religious belonging; and a Google

search indicates that there is at the time of this writing virtually no data on the state of multi-religious belonging in Canada, there is anecdotal evidence a plenty that multi-religious belonging is a reality in the Canadian mosaic.

Before indulging in the speculative art and discipline which is Theology, it will be requisite to engage with those who understand themselves to belong to multi-religious realities, and to draw insight from the stories which they share. Those existing and evident points of intersection must be our first consideration. Data and experience are not always synchronous, and in the Canadian context, experience suggests a growing trend toward multi-religious sympathy if not formal belonging.

For several decades now, as Canadians of European, Asian and African heritage begin to appreciate both the tragedies and the unappreciated gifts of the Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island (North America), there have emerged tentative efforts to walk two paths: that of Aboriginal spirituality and that of Christianity in its various manifestations.

One example is the Diploma in Aboriginal Spiritual and Pastoral Care, offered through The United Centre for Theological Studies of The University of Winnipeg. Initiated at the request of several Aboriginal spiritual leaders, including Bishop Mark MacDonald, Indigenous Bishop of the Anglican Church of Canada, the diploma is intended to provide vocational credentials to visiting elders in correctional and healthcare facilities whose sadly increasing constituency holds both traditional ways and Christianity dear – despite the tragedy of the "cultural genocide", as Chief Justice McLaughlin describes the Residential Schools scandal.

Anecdotally, an increasing number of Canadians appear to seek a blend of their own faith tradition with Buddhist meditative practices and spiritual disciplines. Given the non-theistic positions of many Buddhist

expressions, this presents little difficulty, even to the orthodox of many faith traditions. Similarly, both yoga and Tai chi have been adopted by persons of diverse faith groups as enhancements to more Western faith traditions' meditative disciplines. The radical inclusivity of Hinduism – setting aside for the time being the vexing issues of the caste system, either in the Indian context or Canadian – permits a deep engagement between Hindus and practitioners of other world faiths. The Baha'i tradition, a recent entrant to the panoply of world faiths, is undoubtedly theistic, but so honours all the world's great traditions that Baha'i gentle and globally-minded spirituality is welcoming to all, and dismisses none.

Then, of course, there is that group which Diana Butler Bass describes as “spiritual but not religious.” By definition, and meaning no disrespect, this growing constituency in the Canadian context seeks to build a customized spirituality drawing on the rich resources of many faith traditions.

This entirely anecdotal description of the multi-religious reality in Canada is hardly conclusive. But whether in the long run multi-religious belonging proves to be a viable and lasting aspect of religious expression in Canada, it is quite clear that more than tolerance will be required to accommodate what appears to be a growing phenomenon. The best that might be said of tolerance is that it beats intolerance all hollow. But, as Rabbi Baruch Friedman Kohl of Synagogue Beth Tzedec has noted, “Tolerance is knowing that there is a synagogue at the corner of Bathurst and St. Clair, and not minding.” This is not an entirely glowing commendation.

In 1984, Dr Hans Kung, the Roman Catholic theologian of dialogue, noted that “There will be no peace without peace among religions; there will be no peace among religions without dialogue among religions.”

We must, therefore, as a species, learn to go beyond tolerance to dialogue; beyond dialogue to understanding; beyond understanding to respect; beyond respect to united action for the sake of mending the world. It is too soon to anticipate the role that multi-religious belonging may play in this process, but the process has most assuredly begun.

Steps Beyond Tolerance: The Canadian Context

In 2007, at the 50th Anniversary celebrations of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches in North America, the revered and prolific Lutheran scholar and author, Dr Martin Marty, offered a poignant reminder to the celebrants gathered of how far ecumenical dialogue and cooperation had come in just two generations, never mind interfaith dialogue. In Canada, interfaith dialogue may be justifiably said to have begun in the early 1960s, as Christian theologians sought deep conversation with Jewish counterparts as to how the horror of the Shoa could have been perpetrated in a putative Christian nation.

Within two generations of that tentative and sometimes troubled beginning, The United Church of Canada, but one Christian denomination in the national sphere, had developed and issued four self-reflective study and policy documents of a radical if not revolutionary nature, with a fifth underway: *Mending the World*, redefining ecumenism in light of the increasing pluralism in the Canadian context; *Bearing Faithful Witness*, encompassing the United Church's relation to Judaism; *That We May Know One Another*, a reflection on Christian-Muslim relations; and *Circle and Cross*, Christian engagement with Indigenous spirituality. The fifth, on Christian-Hindu relations, is scheduled for release and study in the spring of 2015.

Each is reflective of another observation from 1984 by Dr Kung. In an interview with the late CBC broadcaster, Peter Gzowski,

Kung noted that posterity might yet view the terrible twentieth century not so much as a time of war and gulag and holocaust, but rather as that moment in history when the world's great religions first began to talk to one another. In the Canadian context, that talk is proceeding apace at the local, regional, national and even global levels. An example of each will suffice for our purposes.

In the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba, located at the very heart of the nation and the continent, the Manitoba Multifaith Council has initiated an annual Multifaith Leadership Breakfast in conjunction with the UN's week for religious harmony. The overarching theme is "For the Sake of the City." The first iteration, in 2014, was addressed by Winnipeg Police Services Chief, Devon Clunis, himself an evangelical Christian of Jamaican descent. The Chief invited the civic, business, academic and religious leaders present to come together for the sake of the whole community. Matching words to action, in March of 2015, Chief Clunis launched a community-based, resident-supported initiative, Restore Our Core. The Manitoba Multifaith Council was among the first groups to be consulted.

Regionally, the Province of Manitoba, through the Vice-Regal office of the Lt. Governor, is now anticipating the 7th iteration of the Lt. Governor's Award for the Advancement of Inter-Religious Understanding. A pilot project was completed in 2007 and the Award was fully instituted in 2011, complete with a commemorative medal struck by fiat of the LG. Among those honoured are a Muslim scholar; a Roman Catholic woman and interfaith activist; the Jewish Founder of the Winnipeg Interfaith Roundtable; a Ukrainian Catholic composer; a Hindu Pundit; a Cree Elder; a Baha'i physician; a Protestant scholar and statesman; and a rabbinic couple.

The Lt. Governors of Canadian provinces are usually chosen for reasons of patronage,

but, once installed in office, they are required to represent all constituents of the jurisdiction to which he or she is named, without prejudice or distinction. The Award thus becomes an almost perfect model for the healthy intersection of "church and state."

Nationally, and as a consequence of the convening of the World Religious Leaders' Summit of the G8 nations in 2010 in Winnipeg, the Canadian Interfaith Conversation was born. The "conversation" is just that: a parliament of sorts of nearly 50 religious and para-religious organizations from coast to coast across Canada that serves as a de facto Canadian Council of Religions. It might as easily be labelled "adventures in dialogue", as participants meet on a quarterly basis to learn to listen to one another and act with one another for the sake of our whole society.

Internationally, extraordinary steps are unfolding in interreligious dialogue. Following on a full eight-year cycle of summits of world religious leaders in concert with the G8 economic summits, a new iteration of interfaith summits has emerged to coincide with the meetings of the G20 group of nations. The focus of the G8-related summits was international compliance with the Millennium Development Goals; the emphasis in the first iteration of the G20 summits is religious freedom and economic development. But in each case, from the local to the international, the hallmark has been the realization of a new vision of world religions talking one to another and to civil society through international governance structures.

Meanwhile, since 2013, the King Abdullah International Centre for Intercultural and Interfaith Dialogue, based in Vienna, has undertaken a research project to "map" centres of interfaith dialogue worldwide. By February 2015, more than 5000 sites worldwide have been identified.

This is not in and of itself any indication as to the future of multi-religious belonging. It does suggest that something new, with due respect to Solomon, is happening under the sun, and a more open, informed and engaged mutual understanding of world religions is emerging in the 21st century.

Christian Gifts to Interreligious Dialogue and the Potential for Multi-Religious Belonging

The 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference coined the slogan “the world for Christ in our time.” As colonially and imperially optimistic as this perspective may have seemed to the largely white, middle-aged and male participants in Edinburgh, it would appear that God had other ideas. Perhaps a better vision might have been, “Christ for the world in every time.” Be that as it may, the 20th was not after all the “Christian century,” nor is the 21st about to emerge as such.

Christianity has been a universalizing religion from its inception; it does not follow that it must be imperial and colonial. Rather, if Christians, theologian and faithful alike, are committed to following Christ into the world which he loved and loves, then there are contributions to the religious story of humanity which Christians might yet make.

Consider the relatively recent discipline of textual criticism. Though tendentious in many religious traditions, Christianity together with its parent religion, Judaism, has a long and fruitful tradition of parsing texts to seek the greatest insight. Pursuing the four steps, which former Dean of Religious Studies at McGill, Rabbi Barry Levy, describes as “text, texture, context and pretext”, a basis for deep insight into sacred scriptures benefits all parties in interreligious dialogue.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity, at first blush an obstacle to dialogue with other religions laying claim to monotheism, may

be broadened in definition to encompass the conviction that all traditions consist of transcendent, imminent and pneumatological expressions. Asking how another tradition articulates those attributes may yet be a basis for dialogue rather than an impediment to conversation.

Christianity’s growing awareness of the power of story is shared to a greater or lesser degree by all religious traditions. Without story, the Gospels would be slim indeed. Please tell me your story, then allow me to tell mine, becomes both a liberating and an enriching exercise.

Conclusion

As noted earlier, Christian ecumenical dialogue is still in its early stages, and remains tentative. Of all world religions, Christianity has demonstrated perhaps the greatest capacity for schism and divisiveness. Interreligious dialogue in any real sense, beyond a striving for conversion or a lamentable tendency to unflattering comparisons in comparative religion, is even newer. But the human race is learning, no matter how slowly. We begin to discern, those of us who are theistic, that diversity may not only be a good thing, it may be in the very nature of God: after all, God seems to have created so much of it.

Perhaps social cohesion is impossible without the counter-intuitive valuing and celebration of diversity in society. Perhaps, just perhaps, the Christian motto for this century might be “embrace complexity.” We can’t avoid it, after all. If so, then those who embrace multi-religious belonging have much to teach the rest of us.

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Multiple Religious Belonging and Churches in the USA

Antonios Kireopoulos

As I begin these remarks on double or multiple belonging by locating myself as a representative of the National Council of Churches here in the USA, and thus from the context in which USA churches have faced, do face, or will face this apparent phenomenon of Multiple Religious Belonging. The USA is, as another friend and colleague of mine, Diana Eck, calls it, the most religiously diverse country in the world, so it would seem that the woven fabric of our nation invites such a phenomenon, and such an exploration into it.¹

The reality of a religiously diverse country has never been in doubt – from the time of the first encounter of Europeans with Native Americans up to the present – but perhaps the reality didn't sink in until significant numbers of young people of the 1950s and 1960s and 1970s visibly experimented with Buddhism and Hinduism, and followed their rock idols into the Hare Krishna community. (On a personal note, around that time I remember hearing the word *Zen* for the first time from one or two of my older cousins, who were dyed in the wool hippies, and whose older, atheist brother brought back his Buddhist Vietnamese girlfriend to marry after his multiple tours in the war. Of course, there is a certain circularity to this family story: their parents, my aunt and uncle, were born again Baptist Christians, and as fate would have it the children of this atheist/nominally Christian/Buddhist marriage themselves both grew up to be born again Christians like their grandparents, one of them even a missionary in the remote reaches of the Amazon for awhile, much to the bewilderment of their non-observant father and mother!)

In more recent decades, the fact of religious diversity sank in even more with the realization that more and more people were

intermarrying, primarily among Jews and Christians (like another of my cousins and her husband, who are trying to raise their adopted daughter from China in both communities, I surmise to give her exposure to both so that she might choose later) – not to mention among Christians of various churches, which still, and perhaps still even more so, brings its own mix of pastoral challenges and opportunities (I say this not only from my own and my wife's experience in an Orthodox-Catholic marriage). And today, with religion on the front pages of our country's newspapers, and specifically with Islam being the focus of our country's seeming re-negotiation of its place on the forefront of religious freedom and tolerance, the fact of our religious diversity is ever more recognized.

This is the context in which our churches in the USA live and witness. This is the context in which double or multiple belonging may be expected to thrive.

You will have noted that I call this an “apparent” phenomenon, one which *may* be expected to thrive in the USA I use this tentative terminology because, I want to say up front, I come to this conversation as a skeptic. I am not skeptical that a person can *feel* he or she has a double or multiple religious identity, or that her or his experience in two or more religious communities is profound. I am skeptical, however, that this double or multiple identity is, for want of a better word, fully realized. I say this as a theologian whose primary day job, when I'm not doing any untold number of other tasks, is in part to help churches theologically negotiate the issues that divide them in very real ways despite a certain degree of unity already present in our common confession of Jesus Christ, and the other part of which is to direct the churches' theological dialogue and collaboration with other faith groups. Note

here: collaboration is meant as a means toward better relationship despite accepted and very real theological differences.

Professor Duane Bidwell, the keynote speaker in this conference, has in one of his books written eloquently of his own affinity for both Christianity and Buddhism.² This eloquence is palpable in his descriptions of his intuitive reactions in pastoral situations where one faith identity yielded to the other when pastorally responding to end-of-life situations. I will return specifically to intersections with Buddhism a bit later in my response. Despite this hesitation, please allow me to plumb the question of the fullness of the claim to double belonging.

Two weeks ago for the Western Christian churches, and one week ago for the Eastern Christian churches, we celebrated the foundational event of our faith: Easter, the resurrection of Jesus after his death on the cross. It would be difficult for me to believe that a person can genuinely claim this belief – and the salvation wrought from this victory over death – and at the same time genuinely claim, for example as a Muslim, that Jesus did not die on the cross and resurrect. Taking it one step further, I cannot see how a person who claims to be truly Christian and truly Muslim can reconcile the Christian belief that this Jesus is God, one of the Triune Godhead, and the Muslim belief that he was a prophet but not divine in any way, and that, in saying “God is One”, one cannot accept a Trinitarian understanding of God.

I have read, as an example, the story of Ann Holmes Redding, an Episcopal priest defrocked for her embrace of Islam and for her claim that she is fully both Christian and Muslim. However, embedded in the story of her journey is an interpretive leap with regard to Christian doctrine – namely, her view that Jesus was not divine as well as human – which allows her to embrace Islam. Though the Christian churches do not actively engage in excommunication as much these days as they did in the past, and are in fact generous in their tolerance of

variations in Christian thinking within their own communities, this interpretive leap on its own would technically remove Redding from the community of Christians. The Episcopal Church might not have defrocked her for this – refer also to the episode with Bishop Spong several years back and his interpretive leap with regard to Mary – still, Redding technically would have excommunicated herself from the Episcopal Church just by holding such a belief.

Overlaying this interpretive leap with an embrace of Islam takes it one step further. Redding might *feel* she is both Christian and Muslim, but the community in which she lives out her faith is right to question the legitimacy of her claim. Imagine the reverse: let’s say, for argument’s sake, that she did think that Jesus was divine as well as human and that he was crucified and resurrected and thus brought salvation to the world, and therefore that Mohammed got it wrong about him even though she fully accepted other parts of the Islamic tradition; or, to remove it from a Christian-Muslim context, that she did not feel Mohammed was truly a prophet, or perhaps even more dramatically, that he was a prophet but not the last prophet and thus the Bab of the Baha’i Faith could indeed be considered a successor to Mohammed. Would the Muslim community embrace her as one of their own? It would be highly doubtful. If I could venture my own conclusion, I would say instead, given the baseline reinterpretation of Christian doctrine that Redding has made, that she is a Muslim informed by her experience with Christianity rather than equally Christian and Muslim.

Parenthetically, I would add here that such interpretive leaps are easier to make in Christianity, and perhaps Judaism, since we are so used to contemporary approaches in theological scholarship: historical criticism, deconstruction and reconstruction, etc. I am not sure that there is a parallel ability to adopt such approaches at this point in time in other communities of faith, say Islam, though this is a topic of conversation these days albeit for different reasons, e.g. in light

of extremist interpretations of Islam that breed such violence today.

There are, of course, other configurations of such belonging. For example, a Jew who accepts Christ would no longer be considered a Jew in the Jewish community, no matter what the person believes about his or her double belonging, and even if the Christian community might claim her or him as a “Jew for Jesus” – but time prevents us from going into these configurations. The point of this, however, is not to dismiss the importance of the experience for those who sincerely feel at home in multiple settings. It is not to refrain from celebrating the deeper spirituality one may find by such experiences. And it is not a reticence to recognize the very real pastoral needs in such a situation. It is, however, *not* contrary to a generous spirit and respect for one another to question the subjectivities brought to such experiences rather than accept resulting self-claims at face value.

Again parenthetically, I would add here that this touches upon the difference between the modern understanding of the individual as the locus of one’s own truth – such and such is “true for me” – and the affirmation of the truth claims made in the context of the experience of the community to which one adheres. A fuller exploration of this difference might be left for another conversation.

In a paper written by Karen Georgia Thompson for a previous consultation in this discussion, she writes that

*[...] dual belongs identify a primary and secondary religious engagement. The secondary informs and even enhances the understanding of God through the primary... Double belonging does not embrace a second religion for study but for practice and adherence. In that the transformational presence of the second is observed.*³

In this characterization of double belonging, Thompson locates Paul Knitter, the Christian theologian who says he became a better Christian because of his experience

with Buddhism. It is precisely in this same place that I see Ann Holmes Redding, though because of her interpretive leap, not as a Christian informed by Islam, which would seem to be the most logical conclusion based on her experience, but again rather as a Muslim informed by Christianity. For I think we can all affirm that there are prayers, meditative exercises, and other practices that, fully experienced and borrowed from another faith, can fortify our experience of our primary faith.

As an aside, yet deserving of more conversation, I would say that it is probably easiest to find this interplay between Buddhism and other religions, specifically for our discussion between Buddhism and Christianity. The search for the divine within oneself, the concepts of emptiness and the dark night of the soul, apophatic ways of talking about the holy, contemplative exercises: these all lend themselves to considerations of the profound extent to which the interplay between Buddhism and Christianity can be experienced.

What I wonder is if perhaps we are misnaming the phenomenon we are studying. “Dual” or “multiple” belonging implies equality, or mutuality. Instead, what seems to be more likely is what Thompson says when she writes:

Dual belongs are not converted to another religion, they encounter the second and it becomes added value to the spiritual experience of knowing the Divine, the self and the world. This transformative aspect of multiple belonging is emphasized as unique, and forges new territory in understanding how individuals encounter religions and incorporate them in their lives” (emphasis added).⁴

Perhaps the better word to use to describe this phenomenon is *overlapping belonging*.

Admittedly, my skepticism about multiple belonging is based on the assumption that at their most basic level, conflicting doctrinal claims – and this is *not* a negative – cannot be reconciled. My skepticism does not

extend, however, to skepticism about the spiritual experience one might find in multiple religious contexts. And it is here that Prof. Bidwell's experience, and description of that experience, is so moving.

Fortunately for me, Prof. Bidwell uses concepts and terminology more associated with Eastern Orthodox theology – perichoresis, for example – to characterize the interplay of religious traditions in his own experience.⁵ Perhaps even more resonant to my Orthodox ear is his articulation of the antinomy present in Buddhist and Christian thought – at least Orthodox Christian thought – in terms of the interplay between creation and the divine. He writes about:

[...] an ultimate (or divine) realm that exists simultaneously with the realm of worldly convention. This is not a dualistic concept; the two worlds interpenetrate, coexist, and intermingle whether or not humans are aware of them. The two realms can be differentiated, but not separated; both are present at once, and the interdependent arising of the conventional world ... is conditioned by and manifests from this ultimate dimension. Jesus is divine but dependently arisen within history; the "dharma is ultimate and beyond our complete knowing, but it is also accessible through the Buddha and Sangha".⁶

For Christians, this antinomy is explained in pneumatological categories, by people as

wide ranging as Reformed theologian Jurgen Moltmann and Greek Orthodox theologian Emmanuel Clapsis, who see the divine light outside of Christianity as the work of the Spirit, akin to the ancient Christian concept of *logos spermatikos*. My question, however, is whether this antinomy can be extrapolated into the service of reconciling different, and even opposing, beliefs; beliefs which have to be accepted if a person is to fully identify with that particular religious affiliation.

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¹ Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).

² See Duane R. Bidwell, "Practicing the Religious Self: Buddhist-Christian Identity as Social Artifact" in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* Vol. 28 (2008).

³ Karen Georgia Thompson, *Multiple Religious Belonging: Erasing Religious Boundaries, Embracing New Ways of Being*, Consultation on Multi-Religious Belonging, Cleveland, Ohio, April, 2015. Unpublished conference paper, 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵ Bidwell, *op. cit.*, 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

Exploring Religious Hybridity and Embracing Hospitality

Karen Hamilton

“To begin at the beginning, the concept of Religious Hybridity is not new in the Jewish/Christian tradition. There are many places in the scriptures and traditions shared by Jews and Christians where it can be seen. One example of the complex nature of multiple religious traditions can be seen in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah Chapter 45:1 and surrounding verses. The context is the Exile of the people of Israel in Babylon. They have been conquered and then sent, or at least the elite, governing classes among them, into exile in Babylon. But then the empires and the balance of power in the world around the people of Israel shifted. The Persians conquered the Babylonians and brought with that conquering a new kind of foreign policy. Instead of removing peoples from their lands, the Persians had a policy of governing by allowing people to remain or return to their home countries.

So it is in language of poetic grandeur that we read in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah of God calling Cyrus the King of Persia, “the Messiah”, “the anointed one”, because he does the will of God which is to return the people to their own land. One who is not of the people is one who does the will of God and who is recognized for that with one of the highest designations possible. Furthermore, there is no indication in the text that he does or ever will follow any other religious tradition than his own of Persia but he can still be and is the anointed one of the people of Israel. Even more, not only does Cyrus not follow the religion of the people of Israel, centred in the God of Israel, he does not even acknowledge or know the God of Israel. One can be a follower of one religion and a major actor in another.

A more recent example of religious hybridity in the Christian tradition – a theological and pastoral example – can be seen in the Sacred Heart Church of All

Nations in Edmonton, Canada. In a blending, no, a marking of both Christian and First Nations traditions, the stand for the paschal candle is constructed from snow shoes, the stations of the cross have figures in First Nations dress and artistic style and as the Roman Catholic, Oblate priest explained to me, the buffalo hide spread on the floor before the altar represents God. For the past 25 years, the congregation of the Sacred Heart Church has been 70% Aboriginal and its style and symbols represent the hybridity of the Christian and First Nations traditions. As the Canadian, Anglican, Aboriginal bishop explained to me some months ago, very few Canadian Indigenous people would self-identify as completely traditionally First Nations in their religious beliefs and practices. Most carry religious hybridity.

In a similar context in which I experienced the Sacred Heart Church of All Nations, I had a faith participant introduce himself, in a very matter-of-fact fashion, as Christian/Buddhist, something that is very common in Japan particularly in terms of the Shinto and Buddhist traditions. It is also very common for ministers and priests in the Christian tradition to be asked to perform interfaith marriages, knowing that the question of religious hybridity is not just one for the creation of a marriage ceremony that reflects multiple religious traditions. As a Christian minister, I have actually crafted and performed a Jewish/Muslim marriage service. The question of the living out or living into religious hybridity becomes both more challenging and more concrete with the birth and parenting of children. My concrete advice to families in such circumstances was to choose one of their religious traditions as the primary one for the children to grow up in but to ensure that they were comfortable in the context of the other – an embracing of religious hybridity

rather believing that there is some kind of abstract, neutral position by which the children can and will not engage the traditions until they become adults and will then have the facility to choose to identify with one.

Since as my colleague, James Christie, proclaims, “Story is to Religion as Math is to Science”, I conclude with a story of some pastoral, theological realities in lived religious hybridity. I served a United Church of Canada congregation that went by the colourful name of St. James Bond. The congregation planned to sponsor refugee families from the former Yugoslavia and when the two families arrived – fathers, mothers and children, welcomed them with great enthusiasm. We had been told that the families were Muslim and after settling them into apartments and schools suggested we help them find a mosque that could be their religious home. Warmly and graciously we were told, over and over again by the

families, that there was no need for a mosque to be found, that they were very happy at St. James Bond as their religious home. They settled in with us and we settled in with them. And then the day arrived when the two families appeared before me to receive Communion. The point of this story is not how I responded or indeed the fact that it was later discovered that while the two fathers were indeed Muslim, the two mothers were Orthodox Christians. The point of the story is that Muslims, given the chronology and shared traditions of Christianity and Islam as Abrahamic faiths, can live that kind of religious hybridity in that context.

Rev. Dr Karen Hamilton is the General Secretary of the Canadian Council of Churches.

From Adherence to Affinity: Multiple Religious Belonging in Hawai`i

Charles Buck

One Funeral, Three Rites

In 1996, I moved from San Francisco to Honolulu to become the pastor of a church that was founded by Chinese immigrants one hundred years ago this year. This church had had a hard time finding a minister. In fact, they went through ten years of interim ministry before I came.

As you can imagine, some things were put on hold during those ten years, mostly ideas for programming, but also, well, dying. There were relatively few deaths in the years before I came. And then as soon as I arrived, people started dying. It was one death after another. In fact, for the first two years that I was there, I averaged about two or three funerals a month, about one every other week. Someone joked that all these people had delayed dying until a pastor arrived. Literally, someone said, all these people were “dying for me to come.”

Among the scores of funerals I performed was one I will never forget. It was a Chinese man in his late 80s. He wasn't actually a member of the church. He was not much of a churchgoer at all during his life. But his son and family were very active members, and they wanted me to do his funeral. I explained that as a Christian minister I would, of course, do a Christian funeral. They were fine with that. Then they asked, “Could we have a Taoist priest come and do a Taoist funeral rite?”

That was a little unusual, but I've handled things like this before, especially when the deceased had been a member of a society that performed some farewell ritual at the time of death. The way I usually handle it, as I learned from a mentor years before, was to let that service take place before the Christian service. Easy enough.

But this family wanted more. They asked, “At the cemetery, for the interment, could we have a Hawaiian kahuna,” or priest, “come and do a native Hawaiian blessing?” I don't know why they wanted this since the deceased was not Hawaiian. He was fully Chinese, so the Taoist ceremony made sense. But Hawaiian? Clearly this was important to the family, and so I said, “Yes, after I finish the Christian committal service, I will step aside and let the kahuna do the Hawaiian blessing.”

When I tell people this story, they usually laugh and say that this family probably wanted to cover all the bases. That is, since the father didn't go to church and they weren't sure where his soul would go, they were playing religious roulette: spin the wheel and hope that one of these services, Taoist, Christian or Hawaiian, was the right one. Or maybe it was like insurance: by doing all three rites they could insure that something would stick and some god would be pleased enough to grant Dad eternal life.

But I don't think so. Not in Hawai`i.

One Religion, and More

Before I tell you why I don't think this family was doing that, let me give you an idea of how people in Hawai`i have generally dealt with multiple religions.

The first time Hawai`i had to deal with multiple religions is when the Christian missionaries arrived in 1820. Prior to that, *na kanaka maoli*, or native Hawaiians, practiced a religion that worshiped numerous gods. Evidence of this religion survives today through the *heiau*, temples made of stones; *`oli*, chants that tell the ancient stories; and *bula*, dances that give expression to the stories and prayers.

Then the first missionaries from America arrived in 1820, and suddenly there was a new religion in town. But there was no conflict. What happened was probably unique in all of missionary history: when Christianity came, there was no other religion, Hawaiian or otherwise, to compete with it.

A decade earlier, Kamehameha I defeated all of his rival kings on the other islands and unified the islands into one Hawaiian kingdom. When he died in 1819, his successor and son, Kamehameha II, influenced by his father's wives, abolished the *kapu* system, the laws and customs that dictated proper behaviour such as eating, the violation of which could result in death. He also ordered the destruction of the ancient temples and defeated in battle those who fought to maintain the ancient religion.

So with the abandonment of laws and religion to guide the conduct of the people, the missionaries stepped into a vacuum that they quickly filled with their new law based on the Bible and Jesus Christ. Along with the *ali`i* – the privileged classes including the royalty – converting to this new religion, and the missionaries' development of a written form of the Hawaiian language in which to translate the Bible into the vernacular, Christianity exploded. Churches were quickly established all over the islands. At one point in the 19th century, the largest churches in the world were Hawaiian churches with tens of thousands of converts.

For these missionaries, there was no question that there was one, and only one, religion. In fact, their mission was, in their own terms, to convert “pagans” and “heathen.” They looked with disgust at native Hawaiian practices and beliefs, which they considered primitive and barbaric. Because Christianity found such firm grounding in Hawaiian soil so quickly, the missionaries were able to make wide-sweeping and profound changes in Hawaiian society and culture. For example,

they banned hula because it was considered too suggestive. And they required Hawaiians to cover their bodies in full western dress, suits for men and long dresses, or *mu`umu`u*, for women.

In the 1970s, a so-called “Hawaiian renaissance” took place, and native Hawaiians began to realize how much of their culture, religion and identity had been lost. Following the Civil Rights Movement on the USA mainland and the rise of ethnic studies departments in universities, Hawaiian studies emerged and blossomed, captivating a whole new generation of native Hawaiians who were reawakened to their identity and culture, which they now desperately sought to recover after having been submerged for the last 150 years. Except for very old Hawaiians who lived in remote areas, very few people spoke the Hawaiian language fluently and knew the culture and practices intimately.

With newfound pride, native Hawaiians enrolled in language classes. Immersion schools where only Hawaiian was spoken sprang up. Hula became popular – not the kitschy, grass-skirt type that entertained the tourists, but the one where every movement told the ancient and modern stories of Hawai`I – and everyone joined a *halau* (club house). History texts used in all schools highlighted the overthrow of the Hawaiian kingdom in 1893 and the subsequent illegal annexation by the United States several years later.

Not surprisingly, in this environment, Christianity itself came under suspicion. Some of the more strident Hawaiians claimed that there was an inherent conflict between Christian faith and Hawaiian values. One could not be both Hawaiian and Christian. Like the missionaries who preached that Christianity was the one and only one way, now native Hawaiians began to believe the same, except that the way was not Yahweh.

Others, however, sought to reconcile the two and to re-think this one or nothing approach to their religious faith. These Hawaiians were not sure that it was necessary to choose only one or the other. Many were moved by the religious confession of their tutu, or their aunts, uncles and grandparents, who had a strong faith conviction in Christ nurtured by strong relationships with the missionaries. “We are Hawaiian and Christian,” they proclaimed.

One way of accommodating both was in ‘Io, the first of all Hawaiian gods, the creator god of the universe, from whom came all the other gods. Native Hawaiians had many gods, thousands of them. But ‘Io was the first among all gods, and therefore, some argued, God had actually been revealed and made known to the Hawaiian people centuries before the missionaries brought the word of Jesus Christ in 1820. So native Hawaiian religious practices maintained their own integrity and authenticity alongside Christian and others. There need not be conflict or contradiction between the Christian faith and Hawaiian cultural practices. A practical result of this has been the integration of Hawaiian cultural and artistic elements in the Christian worship service, such as the *‘oli*, *hula*, *pu*, and *kabali* in many congregations, both Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian.

But there’s another part of the history of Hawai‘i that is important because it offered another way of dealing with multiple religions. That is the plantation history.

From Adherence to Affinity

When plantations were established to grow sugar cane, labourers were needed. Plantation owners used native Hawaiians to be sure, but they needed more. And so they lured labourers from China, Japan, Korea, Portugal, Philippines and Puerto Rico. And these peoples, alongside native Hawaiians, had to work together, live together, create a common language (pidgin) together, share meals together, socialize together, even, over

time, marry amongst themselves and raise families together.

The result is that Hawai‘i today is largely *hapa*, or, mixed races. In fact, if your family has lived long in Hawai‘i, you are likely to count many races and ethnicities in your *‘ohana*, or family. Most local people in Hawai‘i can recite a litany of ethnicities that they embody. I have a friend who is Chinese, Hawaiian, Korean, and Filipino. Another one is German, Portuguese, Hawaiian and Chinese, and his grandchildren throw into that Vietnamese and Japanese with his children’s marriages. Most people in Hawai‘i have multiple ethnic identities. So my being Korean – and only Korean – makes me very boring!

All this intermixing and intermarriage also has meant interreligious understanding and practice. Living and mixing together for so long created an environment in which multiple faiths are represented not just throughout the islands, but in families as well. This is not strict *adherence* to the faith, but *affinity* with those who identify with it, and to respect it as authentic in its own way for that person. This is the key to living out multiple religious belonging in Hawai‘i.

And now to return to that family who asked that their father’s service incorporate a Taoist priest, a Christian minister and a Hawaiian kahuna. I knew that family well and in offering pastoral care to them, I knew that they weren’t trying to “cover all the bases” just in case. I could tell, from the way they described their father, that for Dad, all three – Taoism, Christianity and Hawaiian – were important to his identity. He was not a “member” or adherent to any of the three faiths. He didn’t practice any of these with any kind of regularity. But growing up and living in Hawai‘i, he identified with all three of them.

Another reason that I know it wasn’t “insurance” – that they were not just playing it safe in case he worshiped the wrong god – is because in Hawai‘i, living with and among

different religions is as common as the surf and sand, the palm trees and the trade winds. Few people in Hawai`i are adherents to multiple religions, many not even to one religion. But people in Hawai`i are respectful of all religions. Atheists are few. It is part of the local culture to affiliate with multiple religions as a way of connecting with your neighbours, friends and acquaintances. If you are Christian and your Buddhist friend dies you will go to the service and participate in the Buddhist rites because it is the only right and loving thing to do.

For many in Hawai`i, multiple religious belonging is not so much adherence to multiple faiths, but affiliation with the people who identify with these faiths. Ultimately, it is about building relationship and community – important and necessary values in the diverse and complex local culture that is Hawai`i.

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To Encourage You to Create

Carmen Gonzalez-McKernie

My beloved sisters and brothers, I can only write to you from my own experience; all else would be falsehood. This is my truth: I know from growing up in the rural south in the USA that living in the in-between spaces is hard. Hard, because the powers that be are often dualistic thinkers, and this makes it hard to belong when you're born of the in-between spaces. In my part of the world, the powers that be have dictated that we draw boundary lines according to race, gender, class and religion in permanent markers. They are not to be crossed, not to be redrawn. Nevertheless, I was raised by my boundary-crossing parents, and grew up as part of a gaggle of bi-racial children.

Now I could have chosen to let one side of my heritage dominate the other, to forget the land of my father and his native tongue and his family, or vice versa. I could have easily joined the side of the either/or and pitched my tent solidly in one camp. Instead, my in-between-ness gave me special insight into my creative capabilities. My in-between perspective – shaped by blurred boundaries and soft borders – and my inability to fit pre-constructed racial categories were the very things that enabled me to creatively hold together my bi-raciality in one person.

My response to a system that would have me choose either one side of myself or the other was to creatively find ways to embrace my whole self. This option for creativity set the stage for my dance within my home religion, Christianity, and my branching out toward other faiths. The camp of Christianity into which I was born was also dominated by the dualistic thinking of black and white morality and either/or solutions. I grew into it feeling as if I never fully belonged, or my full self was never affirmed. I could have left this religion, and very nearly did a few times. I stayed, however, not only because I'm learning to imagine

alternative ways of being Christian, but because it is Christianity itself that calls me reimagine it.

The God I meet in the world and the God I meet in scripture encourage me to always, always, always opt for creativity.

Do you only ever read the creation narratives in Genesis in the past tense? Do your theologies hinge upon a finished creation, a long-ago event that has long since stopped? I wonder how many readers of the Bible read it this way and fail to realize that *God is still creating!* I don't think the placement of the creation story in the Bible is just a good move narratively. It also teaches us something fundamental about God, that God is foremost a creator! The God revealed in the rest of scripture is unintelligible if we do not first recognize God as creator. God has a wild imagination and from the primal chaos of our ancestral dust, God imagined *all that is*. Scripture teaches me that when God began to create, God was a spoken word artist and all of life *continues* to hang on every gracious word that falls from God's lips.

It would seem God tends to create in a certain way, and this, I think, has been the most instructive for me in how I respond to God and seek out faithful ways of living. God seems to enjoy creating from what already is. This is affirmed in our creation narrative, and also in the ways of the natural world – God delights in creating from the old, or the already present. In fact, it seems to be the very messiness of the beginning of things that serves as a muse for God. Genesis 1 portrays God as surging, creative and uncontainable energy. As a God who looks around at the *tobu va-vobu*, the unformed and void, and is drawn to it. As Spirit who hovers over the *tehom*, the deep, cosmic water, and says, "I can do something with that." As one who does not shy away

from getting dirty in the mess, but gets down into the dust and plays in it.

This is what I had to do when figuring who I was as a biracial woman, and this is what I am learning to do as I move beyond the borders of Christianity: I'm learning to hover and look out at what seems to be chaotic puzzle pieces that in no way fit together, and creatively imagine how to make it work.

"But you can't do that!" Some have said. Why not, I ask? The creation narrative teaches that we are co-creators with God. Again, I don't think it's just a good literary move to have the creatures reflect the Creator by being creative. Rather, I think the fact that our first injunction by God to be fruitful and multiply is indicative of our own nature: we are foremost co-creators with God. We are not to be fruitful merely in the sense of sexual reproduction, but in the work that we do. We, too, are to look out at the chaos before us and make something good from it. We are to be fruitful in the things that we create, in the plays we write or the music we sing, in the tulip bulbs we plant or the shoes we make, in the games we play or the dreams we dream. Held in the imagination of God, all of creation just can't help but be imaginative!

The creation narrative doesn't stop in the first few chapters of Genesis, but rather it is the vehicle that carries us forth into all of the other stories. It is woven throughout all of Scripture, the acts of this ever-creating God who makes new pottery and new hearts and new peoples and even new bodies, and when we come to the end of it, God is making new the world over. The story is carrying us even now. God is still creating, and God is still looking out on the unformed and void, hovering over the *tehom* in our hearts and our brokenness, and saying, "I can do something with that."

Despite our best efforts to close our canon, God is still speaking. Despite our councils and creeds and commissions to determine what God is and what God isn't, God is still

surprising us with new creation. What an odd thing to do, to close a canon when the very one that is assembled testifies to a God who is never closed off to us. What odd things councils can be, when they end up leaving no room for God to just *be*.

But I digress. One more thing I know from scripture and from observations of the natural world: creativity cannot be kept inside. It longs to pour out from ourselves and be shared, and when it is not it becomes like the scroll Ezekiel swallowed, bitter in the stomach. It withers away, and having forgotten our first love we eventually stagnate. I'm beginning to wonder if what God despises most in the world is stagnation. Stagnation is the stubborn refusal to be carried in the Great Mystery who creates us, and it is the futile attempt to remain the same rather than live and move and have our being in the Creator. Stagnation is poverty of imagination, hardened hearts, stopped up ears, and dull vision. Stagnation is what hardens Pharaoh's heart, making it impossible to hear God in Moses. Stagnation distorts the eyes of the Egyptians in Exodus 1 so that they see threats before them, rather than human beings. Stagnation placates the masses, so they do bidding of the empire rather than speak truth to power. Sound familiar to anyone?

But God desires a people who will leave the empires of stagnation and follow God on a honeymoon adventure into the desert. People who will co-create the kingdom of God alongside God. People who cherish their divine gift to create and make art.

Perhaps you've forgotten this, that we're artists, the whole lot of us. I forget it all the time. We forget that we are wondrously made creatures who can also make wonderful things, we with our beautiful minds and deep spirits. We forget that there are creative ways to live in the world and we end up destroying instead. Thankfully, God sends prophets – co-creators with God in their work – to wake us up and remind us of who we are. God's response (through the

prophets) to obdurate hearts and petrified imaginations is, you guessed it, even more creativity. On the surface of things it seems that prophets are merely sent to tell people to feed the hungry and care for the orphans and widows, but the rampant poverty and oppression of the vulnerable is evident of an even greater poverty of imagination of the people. Prophets re-teach us to imagine with holy imagination by showing us how they have first imagined with God. It's all throughout scripture: Jeremiah used interpretive sign acts, Hosea played out his life with Gomer as if in theatre, Amos wrote exquisite poetry, and Jesus told stories. The response to stagnation is to always, always, always opt for creativity.

I see those people who belong to multiple religions as among the most creative people of our time, and in their creative efforts I see strains of the prophetic. Of course, they may not purpose to do art at all, or perhaps they have no desire to live prophetically, and I certainly don't want to force titles on anyone that they haven't first claimed for themselves. Yet in their presence and efforts we may read the invitation from God to resume our ancient vocation of co-creating with God. In them, dear church, we are reminded that God loves to recycle (which is good news for us) and we can be, ever and always, behold! new creations! Even now the body of Christ is being remade, with dry, white bones being raised up, and tendons and muscles sewn onto them. Do you not remember, church, that God likes to do a new thing? From dry rocks, there springs up sweet water. From water, the best wine. From the womb of a woman, the incarnate God. Church, you yourself are the result of God's love for newness of life! You are a witness to God constantly doing a new thing! Why do we not expect new things from God when they are new each morning?

I have hope that there will always be people among us – call them artists or call them prophets or even call them heretics – who have not forgotten that they are co-creators with God. They have eyes that see colours

beyond our visible spectrum. They have ears that can hear the high notes. They are active in creating for themselves new wineskins in order to hold the swell of the new wine. They creatively seek out ways to hold together two or more traditions in one body, even if the majority says it's antithetical or impossible. They are like the Spirit who hovers rather than settles down and stays in one place. They are like God in being drawn to create new things from the old. What looks like chaos and blurred borders to others is to them the stuff of life, and from it they create!

We're all susceptible to falling asleep, to having our hearts made dull and thick, our ears closed up, and our eyes filtered over. Our work in religious fields does not safeguard against it, and if history is any indicator we run a special risk of falling asleep. The presence of intra-religious persons in our world can function as a prophetic one, and as a sign of the creative Spirit still at work. Ultimately, their creativity calls us into a deeper, fuller, and better way of being human, and to live as co-creators as well. May all of our conversations regarding God and God's people be grounded in the knowledge that God is still creating, and we are, too.

One last thing and I will leave you. I would be in grave error if I failed to mention that we must beware of those who would make bad art; cheap imitations that amount to nothing more than theft. In the name of knowledge and truth-seeking, many have culturally appropriated things that are not theirs for the taking. For my own context, I am thinking particularly of those in the United States who have plundered Native American spiritual practices. Unfortunately, the dominant narrative of the USA is one of conquest; nothing is off limits to us. Accordingly, I offer three brief pieces of advice to those who would choose intra-religious practices later in life as possible practices that may safeguard against theft:

- 1) accept that some religious systems and communities may be closed off to us;

- 2) practice apprenticeship, taking time to become a learner from religious participants, and not just a shallow chooser;
- 3) listen to the “in-betweeners” of multiple religious belongings, those who were born into such a state. They are, to me, the most qualified in guiding our questions, for they have had to creatively hold together different (and sometimes opposing) systems of belief in their bodies from birth.

Sisters and brothers, I leave you with the words of Jesus, a creative human *par excellence* who encourages creativity in us, his disciples, always:

*For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn —
and I would heal them.*

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear...

“Have you understood all this?” [Jesus asked the disciples]. They answered, “Yes.” And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” (Matthew 13:15-16; 51-52 NRSV, emphasis mine.)

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Learning to Sail: My Interfaith Life as a Buddhist Christian

Peter Ilgenfritz

I'm taking sailing lessons, which is about the last thing I'd ever thought I would be doing. I've never particularly liked boats, being out on the water, or things that are tippy or windy.

But you know those times when you hear something knocking on your heart, telling you to go do something?

It was this kind of knocking which I heard ten years ago. Ten years ago, I knew that I needed to die to something. I had no idea what this meant or how to do it, but when I heard the suggestion that I might attend a week-long Zen meditation retreat, I knew it was exactly what I needed to do. I am a pastor and a member of the leadership staff at University Congregational United Church of Christ in Seattle. I had never meditated before, and I didn't particularly like being silent or sitting still. But I knew that this was what I needed to do to let go.

It's a big thing to do something new. I feel like I'm six again, on the first day of first grade, anxious and excited, feeling like everyone else knows the rules except me. It was like that in sailing class last month, and like that on that first Zen meditation retreat. Who are these people, I wondered, in these strange black robes? What's with the chants? And what language are they chanting in? Do we really have to eat *all* of our meals with chopsticks? And do Buddhists bow to everything?

It's a big thing to do something new, because you don't know what might happen next.

We had perfect conditions for my first sailing lesson; absolutely no wind. We barely made it off the dock.

So I was feeling pretty good three days later when I came for my second lesson.

And again, it looked like pretty grand conditions; another day with no wind.

But when we got the boat out in the middle of Lake Union, some serious wind began to blow, filled our sails, and sent our side of the boat high in the air. I remember clinging to the edge of the boat and someone yelling, "Is this alright? We aren't going to tip over?!"

"No", I heard the instructor say, "We're just fine."

"Are you sure?! Are you really sure?!" And then I realized the person yelling was me.

"Yes", the instructor said, "That's why we have a 500-pound keel under us."

I'm not exactly sure what a keel is. Or what it is for. I certainly have not seen one on this boat. I wonder if it can break or fall off. What I do know is my life depends on it.

I was only an hour into that first meditation retreat when something happened. I felt like I did on the sailboat last month – lifted high above the water, teetering on the edge of something I wasn't sure would hold. I released a wellspring of tears that I learned to ride all week. And in and through the terror and the tears, slowly, slowly, a washing away and release.

It was many years ago, a class in my freshman year of college, that I read *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* by H. Richard Niebuhr. Toward the end of the book, he wrote a few sentences that I have underlined and starred many times over the years:

There is something about reality with which we all must reckon. We might not be able to give a name to it, calling it only the void out of which everything comes and to which everything returns. Against it,

*there is no defense. It abides when all else passes away. It is the source of all things and the end of all.*¹

As a young man, I didn't know as much as I do now about what those words mean. But there is enough about loss, struggle and fear in Niebuhr's words that planted a question in me that has defined my life. That is, what is it to have *faith*, to have trust and confidence, in this great void from which all comes and to which all returns?

Christianity talks about such faith coming through Jesus Christ. Christ, the one who took death upon himself and was born to new life in the resurrection. Out of death, new life comes.

In Zen, we practice doing that dying and rising: every out-breath, a dying; every in-breath, a birth.

For the past ten years since that first Zen retreat, I've spent most mornings sitting with my little Zen Buddhist community. Nine years ago I became a member of Cho Bo Ji and made vows to give myself to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Over the years, I have gone through times of deep questioning, doubt, and struggle about my dual faith practices and identity.

I have questioned why I was taking part in such an odd, rigorous practice as Zen that involves getting up very early in the morning, and sitting in uncomfortable positions for long periods of time; a practice I never would have "chosen" if it were up to me. I have wondered how I could really be a member of a Zen Buddhist community and a Christian pastor.

And over the years, in the waves of those questions and doubts, I have come to a deep acceptance: I can't imagine now my life without the narrative faith of Christianity and the mystery, silent encounter of Zen. Both feed me in deep and important ways.

I go to Cho Bo Ji most every morning to "sit, breathe, and listen" in order to practice being in the little rocky boat that is my life. I sit spinning in all my worry, pain, anxiety, and boredom.

And then most mornings, in the last five seconds of the sit, something happens: I let go. Maybe just a moment, and I am caught. Something catches me. It feels absurd to put words to it. It's a feeling – and more than that – a deep knowing, that everything in me is caught by something so much larger than myself.

Doug has been sailing for forty or fifty years. And he offered to take me out sailing last Thursday. That day, unfortunately, there was wind. As I jumped from one side of the boat to the other, tacking into the wind, Doug kept asking, "Can you feel it? Can you feel it, Peter?"

"Feel what, Doug? Like I'm a little less panicked than usual?"

"Can you feel it?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm a little calmer. I feel a little better than I have before."

"Can you feel it?"

I have drawn great comfort from staying on the wharf that I have made of my life; from thinking that faith is all about things being joyful, successful and going quite swell; from having all be well with me in my own little world.

But the call of faith is to so much more than to such a place of security. The call of faith is to risk, to adventure, to setting out from your little wharf of safety that you have made of your life into the unknown. To be brought right up against that unknown, and to trust. What Christianity talks about in story, Zen enables me to practice.

"Can you feel it?" Doug asks.

"Can you feel it?"

I do. In the wonder of Christian chatter and community, in the song and story of a faith that has grounded my life. In the still, silent, contemplative way of Zen.

Something deep and holding is setting me free and sailing into my life.

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¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture: With Supplementary Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 122-123.

A Divine Economy

Joyce Shin

The following order of worship and homily were the opening worship at the Theological Consultation on Multi-Religious Belonging in Cleveland, Ohio, April 2015.

Scripture

In the first scripture lesson you heard, the apostle Paul addressed a conflict that was dividing the church – a conflict over food. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul addressed this conflict two times: first in chapter 8 and then again in chapter 10. The second lesson comes from 1 Corinthians, chapter 10:23-11:1. Listen as I read the Word of the Lord.

Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience, for “the earth and its fullness are the Lord’s.” If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, out of consideration for the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience – I mean the other person’s conscience, not your own. For why should my liberty be subject to the judgment of someone else’s conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why should I be denounced because of that for which I give thanks?

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

Minister: The Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Prayer of Preparation

Let us pray. Loving God, you have so made us that we cannot live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from your mouth. Give us a hunger for your Word and in that

food satisfy our daily need; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sermon

Twenty-four years ago, my parents returned from a once-in-a-lifetime reunion with my father’s family in North Korea. Almost forty years had passed since my father had been separated by the Korean War from his mother and father, sister and brother. Unfortunately, during those years of separation his parents had passed away, and in 1991 my father could visit only their grave. I was not there, but the photographs taken at the gravesite show moments of honouring the spirits of my ancestors. A small stone table had been set. Food had been prepared. A small mat had been laid, and my parents knelt upon it. All of this took place before the grass-covered mounds of earth under which my grandparents were buried. It was all very foreign to me. I had never seen my parents engaged in these practices.

Perhaps had I been younger, they would have waited before showing me those photographs. Even as a nineteen-year-old, when I asked my mom to describe this event to me, I detected a sense of her parental concern not to confuse me. In the midst of her explanation, she said, “You know, of course, this isn’t a Christian practice.”

More than anyone, parents care about how their children receive the knowledge passed onto them. They know their children so well, and they try to give them what they need when they need it. Like Paul, who knew that it would not be appropriate to give infants solid food, parents are sensitive to the particularities of their children – their unique personalities, their idiosyncrasies, their past experiences, and their present needs. It is this attentiveness that makes it possible for parents to meet their children

where they are and to help them to flourish from there.

Not all of us are parents. We have all, however, been students. From experience we know that the best teachers are those who find out what their students already know so that when they teach their students something new, they can teach them in a way that helps them to understand that new idea, that new concept, that new way of doing something. There is an art to teaching, an art to parenting, and an art to pastoring.

The ancients called it *accommodation*, or *condescension*. Accommodation and condescension are terms that may make us raise our eyebrows. Nobody appreciates being condescended to, and accommodation, we know, is a very slippery slope. For now, I ask you temporarily to put aside your skepticism so that we might gain some insight into what the earliest Christians thought about accommodation. For the early church fathers, accommodation was grounded in an understanding of God's relationship with humanity. Accommodation was God's plan to save humanity. They knew, as we do, that on our own, we are incapable of bridging the gap between God on high and our fallen selves. God alone can bridge this gap, lifting us from our sinful state. God does this by coming down – condescending – to humanity for the sake of our salvation. This is how we understand the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is good news because through his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, God came down to us so that we could be raised with him. For Paul, this was God's plan of salvation for humanity; this was the divine economy by which God operates his household, the world.

As a pastor, Paul was concerned about the salvation of each person. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul addressed a conflict over food, because in this conflict he saw a threat to God's plan of salvation. The conflict had been framed by two opposing sides: on one side were those "strong" Christians who knew that "an idol has no real existence" and that "there is no God but one." These

were the Christian doctrines that some in the Corinthian congregation had probably learned from Paul himself. On the other side were those "weak" Christians who still did not seem to *know* these things. They continued to inquire about the food they ate. "How was the meat prepared?" "Am I about to eat food that I shouldn't eat?" Behind the conflict over food was a deeper conflict between people with different knowledge. The "weak" thought it necessary to abstain from eating meats sacrificed to idols, while the "strong" thought that, since idols were nothing, what they ate would make no difference. As you can imagine, if the "weak" observed the "strong" eating meats that had been sacrificed to idols, influenced by their example, the weak might have eaten against their own conscience.

From Paul's rhetoric we can assume that a common saying of his day was something like: "Act for the sake of conscience." It is a saying and a moral principle that has endured into our own day. The right to act according to your own conscience has come to be recognized by many, though not all, groups and governments as an inalienable human right. In the West, religious documents, such as the Declaration on Religious Freedom by the Second Vatican Council, and secular documents drawn up by the United Nations declare that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Presbyterians too protect this right. As Presbyterians we vote on church matters according to our consciences. This is precisely what our *Book of Order* tells us to do. Even if we think that our neighbour lacks the necessary facts, and furthermore, doesn't think about the facts in the right way, we nevertheless uphold his right to vote according to what he thinks is true – according to his own conscience. And we expect that we will receive that same respect.

But in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul says something remarkable. He says, "Act for the sake of conscience – I mean *the other's* conscience, not your own." Paul, like a true leader, reframes the conflict over food in Corinth. He knows that the Corinthians

have been approaching this conflict in terms of their freedom – the freedom “to do whatever one wants.” New Testament scholar Margaret Mitchell tells us that freedom was *the* primary framework for approaching almost any political and social issue in Paul’s day. No matter the specific problem at hand, debates within the church and in the Greco-Roman world at large were often framed by people on different sides who argued against compromising, against conciliating the other side because to do so would entail some loss of their own freedom. The conflict over food in Corinth was no exception: people on both sides were asserting their freedom to act according to their consciences – that is, according to what they knew to be right, or true. The unavoidable result was schism.

By exhorting the Corinthians to “act for the sake of conscience,” not their own, but the other’s conscience, Paul reframes the debate in terms of accommodation. He wants the Corinthians to learn the art of accommodation. What would it mean to act for the sake of another’s conscience? For the strong Corinthians, it would mean that they would not eat meat. I think, however, that Paul had a greater moral challenge in mind than the challenge to abstain from eating meat. Acting for the sake of someone else’s conscience required that the “strong” – the people who thought they had all the answers – give up some of their liberties for the sake of the weak. Paul could not tolerate seeing the strong claiming liberty in the very act that enslaved the weak to idolatry. So he warns the strong: “Take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak... By your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed.” Paul reminds the Corinthians that Christ died for the weak. Christ became human and suffered the worst ills of humanity all for the sake of our salvation. And it is Christ’s example of accommodation that Paul imitates and Paul’s example that we are exhorted to imitate.

So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to

Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

The idea of accommodation may surprise you as a basis for a social ethic. It becomes, however, all the more significant in a religiously diverse world. The conflict over food gives us a glimpse into the complex and diverse religious world of the early church. Greek pagan religions, Judaism, and Christianity existed side by side, influencing each other to such an extent that it was no simple task to determine where the boundaries lay. In our religiously diverse society, we, like the early urban Christians, increasingly interact with people who have knowledge that is different from our own.

In her book *A New Religious America*, Harvard Professor Diana Eck describes the religious diversity that has come to characterize America’s landscape, not just its urban, but also its rural landscape. She writes:

The huge white dome of a mosque with its minarets rises from the cornfields just outside Toledo, Ohio. You can see it as you drive by on the interstate highway. A great Hindu temple with elephants carved in relief at the doorway stands on a hillside in the western suburbs of Nashville, Tennessee. A Cambodian Buddhist temple and monastery with a hint of a Southeast Asian roofline is set in the farmlands south of Minneapolis, Minnesota. In suburban Fremont, California, flags fly from the golden domes of a new Sikh gurdwara on Hillside Terrace, now renamed Gurdwara Road... They are the architectural signs of a new religious America.

For some of you, the contours of a new religious America are found right in your own families. In my case, I grew up in a Korean family with many Presbyterian pastors, including some of the earliest Korean Presbyterian ministers. Who knew that I would marry a Roman Catholic of Czech and Irish descent, whose four sisters were married to an Iraqi, an Italian American Catholic, a Jewish American, and a Turkish Muslim? I distinctly remember my father saying to me after my wedding

rehearsal dinner that the United Nations should give my husband's family an award. He was joking, and he was serious. He knew, as many people know, how challenging it can be for religious commitments to help rather than to hinder relationships in a pluralistic world.

Years ago, I came across a lively debate on the Presbyterian Church (USA) website – the “Jesus Debate.” It centred around the very important issue of being a Christian in the midst of religious diversity. The debate started with a report about the Presbyterian Peacemaking Conference held not long before. One of the speakers at this conference, the Reverend Dirk Ficca, raised the question: How can a Christian be committed to her own faith while being fully engaged in a religiously diverse world? Given the religious diversity in our communities, in our families, and even in our own individual life histories, this is a significant question.

The Reverend Ficca outlined a variety of possible responses. Some Christians think that they alone know the truth, and that therefore, there is no reason to pursue truth in dialogue with others. These are the exclusivists. Others take an inclusivist stance: that is, that Christians can include other religious traditions, because they have the partial picture of truth, while Christians have the whole picture., Then there are the relativists, who say there is no such thing as truth with a capital “I”. So every opinion is relative to another opinion, and no opinion is absolute. There are also some who say that we should pay attention not to the particularities of each religion, because in this way religions differ so much; rather, we should look for the most universal principles that all religions share – this we can call a reductionist approach to religious pluralism. There are a number of other options that we could list and think about. If you are like me, you might find something valuable in each position, but something problematic as well. As a Christian I don't want to water down my faith in Christ.

I cannot give this faith in Christ up just because it is the main thing standing between me and a person of another religion.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul provides us with another alternative – one that is grounded in God's plan of salvation, in the cross. For Paul, the incarnation, crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ was the ultimate event of divine accommodation. As a pastor and missionary, Paul modelled himself after Christ and called others to do the same. Like a parent concerned about how her child receives the knowledge passed onto him; like the teacher who adapts his style to the needs of his student; or like Paul, who became all things to all people, we can be in relationships of genuine love and concern for the other person's well being.

And yet, accommodating relationships don't have to be marked by unchanging hierarchies of authority. We can strive for relationships of mutuality and reciprocity in which everyone recognizes that it is not always enough to act according to what one knows. While knowledge divides, love builds up.

What would this look like? Perhaps it would take the form of sharing stories, by which we would express how we came to believe what we believe in and came to be committed to what we are committed to, and came to do what we do. Perhaps it would take the form of conversations with our friends from other faith traditions, in which we are willing – if so compelled by what we hear – to be transformed by the other person's concerns, values, and ways of seeing the world. We don't need to fear that in our willingness to be transformed we are risking the core of our Christian beliefs. The willingness to be transformed is rooted in the cross. Out of love for us, Christ willingly transformed himself by becoming like us, taking on our suffering, and dying a human death – all for our sake. Imitating Christ requires more than simply acting according to what we know. It requires more than acting for the sake of our own consciences.

Our pursuit of truth cannot only be for our benefit, but must be for the benefit of everyone. That is the good news of Christ. That is God's divine economy. Amen.

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Interrogating the Idea of Hybridity from an Interfaith Perspective

Israel Selvanayagam

The following papers by Israel Selvanayagam, Lovely Awomi James and Balakrishnan were presented at the Interdisciplinary Theological Colloquium on Hybridity, Hospitality and Multiple Religious Belonging, 2-5 October, 2014 at the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute in Chennai, India.

Some Basic Observations

The term “dialogue” stands for a principle and a practice. The principle is governed by some degree of faith commitment, along with a fundamental openness, respect and love for the other. The practice includes serious listening, clarifying and correcting our opinions and behaviour. The enemies of dialogue are the assertive fundamentalists and fanatics on the one hand, and uncritical or unqualified pluralists on the other. Both are exclusive in making absolute claims while being superficial in their thinking and relationships with others. In between there are those who are half-baked, unclear and non-committal; and those who are not able to distinguish between Truth and truths and who threaten others with conflict, confrontation and communal mobilization. Consequently, dialogue often does not move on from a prolonged “honeymoon” speech. Such perfunctory speeches on peace, love, unity, harmony, tolerance, etc. are unbearably feeble in their effect and usually repetitive.

While the study of religion and religions develops to ever-more sophisticated heights, religion or spirituality tourism is on the increase. Such tourists, mainly from the West, want to enjoy religion as “jelly and ice cream slipping down the throat smoothly” (Samartha). They want to pick and mix traditions in a glamorous cocktail. They want to enjoy the colour and fragrance of the camphor flame, music and meals. They seem to fear knowing the truth about different religious traditions. Some of them recite the slogan “one truth – many religions”, which seems to satisfy for a

variety of people ranging from academics based in the universities to illiterate masses in the villages. If one says anything to challenge this or points out the complex ways religious traditions have developed within and without, pointing to their root stories, symbols and visions, such a person may be branded as closed and intolerant.

Cultural reception of postmodernism has much to do with this. Postmodern interpretations seem to seduce and confuse modern minds, and in India in particular, traditional to postmodernist themes tend to be lumped together. It is no surprise, then, that theological students who are asked to write about postmodernism in their exams demonstrate that hardly anyone understands its meaning and history. However, they are not to be blamed since its exponents themselves are unclear. In a major publication of an anthology of postmodernism in 1996, the editor states the following of postmodern positions:

Philosophical opinion regarding the postmodern family is deeply divided. For some postmodernism connotes the final escape from the stultifying legacy of modern European theology, metaphysics, authoritarianism, colonialism, racism, and domination. To others it represents the attempt by disgruntled left-wing intellectuals to destroy Western civilization. To yet others it labels a goofy collection of hermeneutically obscure writers who are really talking about nothing at all.¹

However, the writer claims that all three of these reactions are misguided and that there is an identifiable trend within the circle, though members differ in perceptions and articulations as in any human family. But he does not claim to give a satisfying definition or a neat history.

After eight years, a less voluminous book appeared: *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*. In his introduction, editor Steven Connor states, “Surely, the first thing to be said about postmodernism, at this

hour, after three decades of furious business and ringing tills, is that it must be nearly at an end.”² This does not mean that it cannot be extended to assume new roles in the intellectual sphere. Connor distinguishes four different stages in the development of postmodernism: accumulation, synthesis, autonomy and dissipation.³ He explains these by assigning historical periods and major trends in the thinking. For example, he quotes one writer who declared roundly in 1997 that the word *postmodernism* can be understood as “nothing more and nothing less than a genre of theoretical writing.” He adds, “Postmodernism had passed from the stage of accumulation into its more autonomous phase. No longer a form of cultural barometer, postmodernism had itself become an entire climate.”⁴ He points out, with reference to respective writers, that though it is not clearly defined, postmodern thinking has touched almost all the areas of life such as politics, war, science, ethics, the arts and music. Towards the end of his introduction, Connor notes:

*Indeed, one might say that postmodernism has been defined increasingly in terms of a complex conjuncture of scientific optimism and more traditional critique of science. A postmodern rejection of modern scientific rationality has been complicated by the emergence of what might be called “postmodern sciences” – of information, cybernetics, and ecology – which are based on the relatedness of the human and the natural rather than on the stark antagonism assumed by the Enlightenment and the nineteenth century.*⁵

In sum, it seems there is a possibility here for dialogue between postmodernists and religionists on specific questions such as overcoming the fear of loneliness and death, owning ultimate visions, goals and values, returning to root stories and defining moments in the dynamic process through which religious traditions have passed. Ideas of hybridity or hybridization, plurality, multiculturalism and multiple belonging are claimed to be the hallmarks of postmodernism. However, do they guarantee creative interaction, mutual growth and practical cooperation between religious communities?

A Review of a Response to Religious Pluralism

Peter C. Phan’s illustrious book *Being Religiously Interreligious: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue*, represents a bold attempt to craft an interreligious response in a postmodern world while expressing the difficulties involved. In his preface, he states his approach in extending his theology of interreligious dialogue:

[...] by reflecting on the challenges that interreligious dialogue in the postmodern age pose to the way of doing theology; by developing particular themes of Christian theology, especially in dialogue with Confucianism and Judaism; and by indicating how prayer and worship should be practiced in the postmodern, multicultural, and multi-religious age.

However, as he admits, with Vietnamese roots and American academic orientation he lacks expertise in the other religions of Asia such as Taoism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Sikhism and tribal religions.

He pitches his study in the context of the challenges of postmodern ideological trends, though these cannot be defined unambiguously. Following the Enlightenment and modernism which have witnessed horrors in history such as technology-fuelled wars, postmodernism is basically seen as “a multivalent and even ambiguous phenomenon” which rejects “modernity’s preference for stylistic integrity and purity and espouses instead heterogeneity and polyvalence, bricolage and pastiche, and an eclectic mixture of disjointed and contradictory elements.” There is an attempt by Phan to connect such plurality with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which stands for a social Being containing true unity and diversity. However, this is not pursued to distinguish between the plurality and contradictions within not only religious pluralism but also the disjointed plurality of postmodernity. This is evident when the book mentions the four basic types suggested by Paul Knitter: replacement, fulfilment, mutuality and acceptance. However, an analysis and exposition on how limited such categorization is in the light of the on-going debate on proper Christian approaches to

people of other faiths is of course not the main purpose of the book. It may be useful to analyse the main arguments of the book at this point.

The book is divided into three parts: (1) doing theology interreligiously in the postmodern age; (2) Christianity in dialogue with other religions; and (3) worship in the postmodern world. First, it examines the challenges postmodernism poses to the task of faith seeking understanding. Phan starts with an epistemological discussion that aims to confront postmodern suspicions against *mythos* and *logos* as pathways to truth and suggests exploring an alternative path to wisdom. He argues:

*the practice of foolish wisdom or wise foolishness, common to both Christianity and non-Christian religions and celebrated by philosophers and theologians of East and West, may be, when coupled with personal holiness, the most potent antidote to the burning acids of postmodern skepticism and an appropriate pedagogy to the love of wisdom in postmodernity.*⁶

The antidote primarily includes the organic unity presented in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which represents the post-Vatican II developments. There is also a criticism of the Western phenomenon of multiple religious belonging as “a dangerous fruit of interfaith dialogue.” Without clarity about the root story or a vision of faith and conviction about its value, such a pursuit appears to weaken any consistent adherence to the church and the reasonable coherence of Christian theology.

Secondly, the book refers to major themes of interfaith dialogue, and in line with the postmodern character of disjoined phenomena, the themes do not have a constructive sequence. The central thread running through the following themes is not easy to decipher: claims of uniqueness and universality; God as holy Mystery; talking of God in many and diverse cultures and religions; Jesus as one who was like the Buddha, Enlightened and the Enlightener, and the validity of Jesus as the unique and universal Saviour with the Jewish covenant; connected concerns about Jewish-Christian

reconciliation following the horrors of the Holocaust; and questions of holy war and unholy violence. Historical factors, insights from the East Asian liberation theology of the *minjung* and the pioneering Catholic attempts for reconciliation are interwoven in the discussion; any mention of biblical material is minimal.

There are critical remarks as well. For example, while sympathizing with the victims of the Holocaust and wars, Phan observes:

*In insisting upon suffering and empowerment as well as on innocence and redemption, both Holocaust theology and Asian liberation theology run the risk of romanticizing the people whose interests they serve, whether the state of Israel or the minjung or the women within the minjung, placing them beyond the realm of evil and turning them into new messiahs and idols.*⁷

Yet there is an expression of optimism that these diseases are not immune to antibodies that fight from within. Some critics may wonder whether or not Phan represents the viewpoint of Western nations and theologians.

Thirdly, Phan identifies seven challenges of postmodern culture and its ethos within the liturgical inculturation of the Roman Catholic Church. They are: (1) the challenge to reject the traditional view of the timeless *Logos* which becomes incarnate in different cultures for the suggestion of an intercultural encounter and dialogue between at least two cultures, thus raising questions about the dynamics and rules of intercultural communication; (2) the issue of power in intercultural encounter as of paramount importance; (3) the question of power which again emerges in the choice of the culture into which the Roman liturgy is to be inculturated, as there exist both dominant and suppressed cultures within any context, such as the Hindu world; (4) the issue of power in the place and role of popular religion; (5) in light of the death of metanarratives, the challenge of finding an alternative in the midst of competing religious metanarratives; (6) challenges surrounding the place of not only the sacred

texts but also the music, songs, musical instruments, gestures, dance, art and architecture of a local culture; and (7) the challenge of defining theology, as theological themes are unique in a particular liturgy. The solution cannot be found in wrapping the Roman liturgy with cultural garments but rather must be found in seeking a vibrant new way of being “church” – a way characterized by dialogue which leads to the creation of a new ritual family, with its own texts, rites, sacraments, forms of popular religiosity and various expressions of worship.

Phan goes on to address a few more questions: how much uniformity can we stand and how much unity do we want? There is no one answer except in reaffirming the ever-guiding norm: to make Christ’s saving grace as accessible as possible for different types of people here and now, and the cardinal gospel values of faith, hope and love. Finally, what is most advisable is a liturgy of life which consists of experiences of God in the midst of life and all its dynamics, governed by the special history of revelation and salvation, the centre of which is Christ’s sacrifice on the cross with the abiding presence of the Absolute and Holy Mystery. Phan is preoccupied with the idea that there should be a new perception of the liturgy of the Catholic Church as the symbolic presentation of the liturgy of the world, but this is grounded on a misunderstood theology of Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross.

Phan earnestly grapples with the issues of postmodernity in hopes of suggesting a Catholic response outlining a theology of religious pluralism and liturgy for a multicultural world. But when he claims to present Asian perspectives, we find serious limitations and concerns. First, Phan’s academic categories of modernity and postmodernity are beyond the grasp of the majority of Asians due to the prevalence of illiteracy, poverty and religious and cultural plurality, with all its confusing contradictions. Second, he mainly references and addresses an East Asian religious and

cultural context. Third, his chief starting point is a Roman Catholic perspective and post-Vatican II presuppositions, developed by interpretations from scholars and theologians of the West, with the views of some select Asian Catholic theologians thrown in. Fourth, he hardly acknowledges the original contributions made to ecumenical discussions on interfaith dialogue by some Protestant theologians.

When we celebrate the gospel in Asia, one wishes for far more analysis of the pressures under which Asian Christians are placed (except for in the Philippines) as a little flock – we are the descendants of converts from the major religious traditions of the region and our religious identity and history of conversion are today often ridiculed. Furthermore, it is only in dialogue that we realize how often issues of injustice – the horrible effects of which mainly affect the poor – are covered over by the labels of religion and culture. Finally, any recognition of new forms of religion and new expressions of religiosity, both implicit and explicit, seems to be beyond the scope of the rigorous study in Phan’s groundbreaking work. Phan’s book does indeed throw some light on how to be religiously interreligious in the Asian context and the implications this may have for questions of identity.

The Dynamic Process of Historic Religious Traditions and Incidental Syncretism

Dynamic process is an important dimension of a religious tradition, involving as it does transition and mutation due to interaction with other traditions. At the same time, this process can cause some tensions, dilemmas and confusions. Recognition of this fact may help us distinguish between authentic and artificial kinds of hybridity.

Let us start with the Semitic tradition. What was most unique in the Hebrew religious tradition was the perception and experience that their God, YHWH (the LORD), had liberated their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. They were led through a hazardous journey through a wilderness and were

joined by small groups who had been attracted by their social ethos and structure. Upon their arrival in the promise land they joined with a local group in fighting for their rights in a context of political oppression. They had a unique view of community, bound by a covenant with YHWH and with a collective understanding of priesthood and a corporate commitment to establish justice and peace. Nevertheless, internal and external impediments led them never to realize their original vision of re-sharing resources. They deviated from the original vision and allowed themselves to adopt not only the foreign socio-economic and political policies, but also religious institutions such as kingship, priesthood and temple. Furthermore, the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian and Greek invasions and occupations affected their acceptance of religious notions such as the soul, the last judgment, resurrection, heaven and hell. Prophetic pronouncements reminded the community of their heritage and called for a new orientation. The prophets put forward a new vision of an extraordinary ruler and, according to one group, “the anointed one” – Messiah – would be a military hero and political figure wielding absolute authority, and according to the other he would be a fascinating suffering servant, who in identification with the oppressed and suffering would exert great influence on his own people as well as on other nations.

When Jesus came, he was perceived to be a devout Jew, Rabbi, prophet, Son of Man and Son of God. The title “Messiah” had to be kept secret! At the beginning, Jesus was parochial, his mission was only to the lost sheep of Israel. He was challenged by a few – like the Canaanite woman – and consequently he broadened his boundaries to accommodate the Gentiles. At the last supper of Passover, he declared his blood of the “new covenant” was for the “extended many” as well. There are many perceptions and interpretations of his death and resurrection in the New Testament. Obviously, when the Jesus movement spread to the Gentile world, understandings of Jesus were unavoidably Hellenized and Romanized. Positively, he was projected as

the crucified Lord (as opposed to the lord emperor), at the feet of whom all powers and authorities should be surrendered. And negatively, Jesus was regarded as a deity to be worshipped in his own right without any recourse to other members of the Trinity, which was gradually taking shape as an enigmatic vision just as was the name Yahweh.

Indian Christians are part of the extended Jewish covenant, and without clarity about this unique position, they give adjectives such as “sweet” and “precious” to the name of Jesus for their personal devotion and present him as one to be bargained in the market of gods and goddesses.

Islam was born in Arabia combining the tradition of those who had been worshipping one God and the new revelation received by the Prophet Mohammed in the seventh century. Without belittling its originality, it is not difficult to see the Judeo-Christian influence on the Holy Qur’an, the tradition of the Prophet (Hadith) and the formulations of beliefs, duties and legal systems. There are pointed references to Jesus (as a great Prophet) and Trinity (understood tri-theistically) in the Qur’an, which seem to respond to confused beliefs and practices by Christians of the age. The inner dynamics and external connections make the situation quite complex. Though it claims to be simple and scientific, post-Prophet Islam has experienced political conflicts and sectarian divisions.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are called the Abrahamic faiths as Abraham is accepted as their common ancestor. But there are differences between the Qur’an and the Bible even in the narrative of Abraham. Though Muslims call themselves “people of the book” – they do this believing the Judeo-Christian scripture is corrupt while the Qur’an is an indispensable corrective. Today, there are important areas of tension between Jews, Christians and Muslims. Agreement on an independent homeland for Palestinians and public recognition of the state of Israel is yet to be

achieved. Jerusalem as a holy city is contested by all three religions. Despite marathon efforts, understanding, peace and reconciliation continue to be evasive.

The Indian religious traditions have a different story. Let us start with the Vedic religion, which developed around 1500 BCE. As studies show, sacrifice (*yajna*) is the most central element of this religion.⁸ Developments in understanding sacrifice provide a set of keys for understanding the dynamics of the Indian religious traditions. From a simple gift or food offering to gods, sacrifice developed into a complex ritual mechanism with an elaborate priesthood, which was believed to generate the power to create and recreate the universe and all forms of life. Dominant ideas of Indian religious thought such as *karma* (action), *Brahman* (holy power), *tapas* (heat), *kama* (desire) and *dharma* (righteous order) were developed in the context of ritual sacrifice. In spite of the fierce attack of the Sramanas – including the Indian Enlightenment heroes Mahavira and Buddha – the notion of ritual power, the purity of the Brahmins, and the hereditary, hierarchical and divisive caste system and belief in *karma samsara* have endured. Certain ideas were assimilated – such as *ahimsa* and divine heroes (*avatara*) such as Buddha and Krishna – and various systems were reformulated, such as the *varnasrama dharma* (the duties of four castes and four stages of human life) and *purushartha* (four goals of human life).

The Bhagavata tradition, with Krishna as an incarnation of Vishnu, was the first to develop the way of passionate devotion (*bhakti*), encouraging the emergence of a number of such traditions in the period from the second century BCE. There were several divine figures claiming supremacy and demanding devotion, of whom the three major deities were introduced in a kind of trinity or triad and each assigned a particular work. Thus, Brahma was the creator, Vishnu the protector and Siva the destroyer. Subsequently, Brahma receded to the background and Vishnu and Siva were regarded as supreme, performing all the above activities and offering liberation to

their devotees from the chain of births. Through a myth-making process of marriage between the male god and the goddess, different cults, and family building (e.g. Murugan and Ganesh becoming the sons of Siva and Parvati), the major traditions assimilated the minor ones without integrating fully. In all of these unparalleled and complex developments, the most enduring features are the Brahmin priests holding the key of ritual power and the belief in *karma samsara*.

Hindu tradition had to face external challenges as well. When Islam came to the Indian sub-continent with its composite culture and religious life, it had to face both a politically conquering power and the challenging theology of one God, one scripture and one universal brotherhood. The conflict developed into moments of violent confrontation. In such a context, great figures like Kabir and Nanak of 15-16th centuries developed a spirituality that drank from the wells of both Islam and Hinduism. Guru Nanak attracted a band of disciples and they were the pioneers of the Sikh tradition, which, after a period of suffering persecution, achieved stability by the efforts of the tenth Cardinal Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708). Though Sikhism has its unique features, it is hard to deny the inclusion of both Hindu and Muslim resources in its scripture Adigranth. It is a challenge for Muslims who have continued to claim the finality of the Qur'an historically and theologically.

Though the high caste Hindus enjoyed the fruits of colonial government, and though colonial institutions contributed to a new awakening that resulted in movements for reformation, renaissance and resurgence, the Hindutva movement has kept up a strong challenge. Instead of affirming constitutional nationalism, its proponents today promote the Brahmanic tradition in the name of cultural nationalism. The postmodernists may have to answer questions such as: can a caste-centred culture and society, a practice such as child marriage (second highest ratio in the world) and women's oppression (steady decline of

women-men ratio due to female foeticide and infanticide) be part of multiculturalism and plurality? Not to mention other evils such as a communalized, corrupt and indifferent bureaucracy and poverty in Hindu India.

The dynamic process in the history of the two clusters of religions we have outlined here points to a number of irreconcilable differences between them in regard to their environment, sequence and ideas and beliefs. Therefore, students of religion and religions need to be very cautious not to be carried away by sweeping generalizations either in the name of phenomenology or theology.

Eric Lott, who suggested dynamic process as a key dimension of religion, has recently done more extensive study exploring the social dimensions of religion and taking into account corporate identities and personal identities that lead to a number of “dangerous dynamics” in the modern world.⁹ He understands “identity” as a key category for human self-understanding and evaluates the role of religions in its pursuit, particularly in India.

In a fast-changing modern world, individuals and communities are seeking identity through the support of a distinctive narrative. Identity assertion is the order of the day. In the area of a dominant religious tradition in secular India it has taken different forms. For example, the author of the most famous Vaishnava text, Bhagavad Gita, tried to synthesize various explosive strands around 2nd century BCE. He succeeded in presenting an integrated spirituality (“do your duty having fixed your mind on the Lord in loving devotion”). But simultaneously, the text reaffirms the power of Brahmanic ritual, dharmic war, caste and the invulnerability of the everlasting soul and its transmigration. Gandhi projected the Gita as the Hindu bible because of its teaching of *ahimsa* (in fact the word occurs only four times in passing). B. G. Tilak interpreted its central message: “fight and kill in order to restore the ancient dharma.” The Vishva Hindu Parishad, an extreme

movement, insists that every Hindu home must have a copy of it. Recently, in the heat of a controversy in Russia (2011-12) about the translation of the Gita and commentary by a Guru as inciting violence, the then Minister of External Affairs S. M. Krishna declared vigorously that the Gita was India’s national book. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during his visit to Japan (Aug-Sept 2014), presented two copies of the Gita to the Japanese government and people and said there could be no greater gift from India. One would expect that the majority of non-Vaishnava Hindus, including the Saivites, protested! These are a few examples of how individuals, movements or governments can dangerously appropriate religious traditions and texts to fit within their own identity pursuits and agendas.

Back to the Roots: A Case for a New Reformation of the Church

We have already noted the protest of the Hebrew prophets against the deviation of their community from the original call and against hybridization or syncretism with unjust powers and systems. Jesus, too, challenged those Jews who had forgotten their roots and created a mess of their faith. He warned against putting the new wine of the breaking in of God’s reign in old wine skins (or, if the botanical analogy is more apt, to hybridize with a dead trunk!). He relived the original liberation ideal by declaring himself the Son of Man, the representative of the victim community, and identified with the marginalized. The early preaching of the apostles, recorded in the New Testament, makes central references to the exodus and its connection to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Nevertheless, for Paul and his colleagues, there was a crucial hermeneutical challenge as they propagated the new faith in the Hellenistic and Roman world. Salvation by undeserved divine grace, or any acceptance of the acceptance of God already found in Christ, was a central message for Paul. Yet, this posture could lead to the extreme of forgetting and undermining the Jewish roots of the faith, even though the church was

defined in Hebrew terms, i.e. “the kingdom of royal priesthood” (Ex. 19:6; cf. 1 Pet. 2:9). When excitement about the new faith went to the extent of undermining this Jewish heritage, the Jewish Paul had to tell the Roman church by analogy that even though some branches had “been broken off”, the root of the olive tree was holy and Christians were like wild olive shoots that “have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches” (Rom. 11:16-18). And when the idea of undeserved grace and new freedom was misunderstood, James brought balance by reminding the church about the Hebrew tradition’s emphasis on justice and harmony. More significantly, the often controversial and final book of Revelation, despite its flashing and frightening images, has in my perspective succeeded in working out a rapprochement between the Jewish and Christian traditions.¹⁰ However, this book has not been read as highlighting the fact that the Jews and Christians share the same roots.

It was a great pitfall that the early custodians of the Christian faith, both political and ecclesiastical, were anti-Semitic through and through. Their accusation against the Jews for deicide (killing Jesus on the cross) and their venomous attacks on them are shocking. The classical creeds do not state God’s primary revelation to the Hebrews and or the messages of the great prophets, contained in three quarters of the Bible. The arc of Jesus’ life and ministry also goes unmentioned. Furthermore, in the centuries that followed, the terrible Christian persecution of European Jews remains a permanent scar in Jewish memory. The Reformation did not seek to redress this, but instead made the situation yet worse:

The medieval legacy was taken up by Luther during the Reformation period. In 1543 he wrote On the Jews and their Lies in which he called for the burning of synagogues and Jewish homes and the end of safe-conduct passes for Jews. He argued that they were parasites on society, harder to convert than the Devil, and destined for hell. He tried unsuccessfully

to persuade the German prince to expel all Jews from Germany.¹¹

This was detrimental for the Jews in Germany for centuries leading up to the Holocaust. In fact, if read closely, one can demonstrate that the three *sola*’s of Luther’s theology – grace, faith and scripture – also fell short of a comprehensive and fair interpretation of the Christian faith. Even these central Reformation principles can be understood and found in the Jewish faith, scripture and tradition. It is uncharitable to relegate, as many Christians do, the Jewish faith to one of mere promise and preparation for the coming of the Messiah. The splintering of the churches during the course of the Reformation can in part be attributed to this anti-Semitic attitude and behaviour.

The same confusion continues in the churches today, and thus reflects a superstructure without a stable foundation, or a hybrid tree with dead roots or trunks. Restoration cannot occur by binding many shoots together artificially. In the first phase, many attempts of the Indian Christians to reach “points of contact” with Brahmanic Hinduism resembled this. This is not to deny that there are trunks and shoots in all religions and secular movements which may relate fruitfully to the Judeo-Christian vision and tradition, such as those with a vision for liberative action. As Jesus said about those who did the works of liberation outside the band of his disciples: “those who are not against us are with us” (Luke 9:50).

Finally, where does all this lead us in understanding interfaith dialogue today? I suggest that the continuing model of “dialogue” – of gathering together and sharing stories and concepts – is of limited value. Studies of comparative theology and interfaith relationships will only be fruitful if their application to day-to-day life is taken seriously. For example, Brahmanic Hindus claim that their *dharmā* is universal; Muslim friends claim that their tradition stands for spiritual equality; and Christians point out Jesus’ unique message that those who are like a child will take a central and leading

role in the kingdom of God. In a genuine and serious dialogue, the practical implications of these claims can be shared. The unique Judeo-Christian vision of a God in solidarity with victims of injustice and the vulnerable may draw the attention of all partners in dialogue. An action-oriented and issue-based dialogue seems to be the only way ahead. And, undoubtedly, it will continue to be a great challenge for Christians to work for a new reformation of the church and recover true evangelical faith.

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¹ "Introduction" in Lawrence Cahoon (ed.), *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 1.

² "Introduction" in Steven Connor (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶ Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), xiv.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁸ See I. Selvanayagam, *Vedic Sacrifice: Challenge and Response* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996).

⁹ See E. Lott, *Religious Faith, Human Identity: Dangerous Dynamics in Global & Indian Life* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation for the United Theological College, 2005).

¹⁰ See I. Selvanayagam, "Jewish-Christian Theological Rapprochement: Insights from the Book of Salvation" in *Gurukul Journal of Theological Studies*, XXIII (1 January 2012), 50-64.

¹¹ Helen P. Fry (comp. & ed.), *Christian-Jewish Dialogue – A Reader* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996), 12.

Hybridity: A Personal Reflection

Alan Amos

At first I found the use of the term “hybridity” rather alien; in fact, it connected in my mind with the way in the Eastern Orthodox tradition that what is “other” or “strange” may be considered heretical. And yet I did not stop there; I realized that many of us within the Christian tradition have experienced not just one way of being a Christian and of worshipping but a number of ways, some of which seem to be in conflict with others. We may have grown through that experience to value these different strands, even when they are hard to reconcile one with another. And so to an extent my way of being a Christian is already somewhat “hybrid.”

Then I went on to realize that in my encounter with other faiths, with Islam and Judaism in particular, I could not learn and understand just as an outsider. I had to take a step of imagination and explore what it might be, what it might feel like, to be an insider. I needed to borrow another pair of eyes, perhaps to hang on to another’s garment of belonging, in order to see. And then I came to realize that I could also perceive my own faith in a different way having been through that experience.

But then, as I understood from the consultation on ‘Exploring Hybridity, Embracing Hospitality’ held in Chennai there are those who feel inwardly part of more than one faith tradition, perhaps through family, through marriage, through life experience and encounter. Rather than just reacting against this “mixing of faiths”, I believe we gain much more from giving the time and the attention to understand what is going on, and what those who have this diversity of experience have to share with us.

This has also caused me to reflect on the origins of the Christian faith, that Christ was a Jew born within a religious tradition which he came to reform as well as to transcend; that he knew within himself the experience

of hybridity, the challenge to bring into the Kingdom of God both old and new (cf. Mt 15:32). We have seen through history the terrible danger of rejecting “the Jewish face of Christianity”, in making the Jew the excluded outsider, perhaps partly in response to the earlier exclusion of Christian believers from the synagogues.

It is easier to exclude than to accompany; it is easier to prescribe than to listen; and yet as we trace the drama of Christ’s life through the gospels, we find the absence of a “prescriptive” approach to living, and a willingness to look at each situation as it arose, and the needs and motivations of those who gathered around.

I have therefore come to see that the experience of multiple belonging to faith communities, of “hybridity”, is a challenge to hierarchy and hierarchical ways of thinking and organisation. In some cases the person who experiences an attachment to more than one faith has to say “I can do no other” or “I can be no other.” That challenges the religious institutions to a new tolerance and sensitivity. This also calls for a shift away from the leadership of a faith that defines its membership in a way that conserves the power and control of that leadership, to a new respect for the awareness and consciousness of the individual who believes. We are called to enter a new maturity in believing: “The wind blows where it pleases, and you hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit”(John 3:18).

To sum up, perhaps the future belongs to those of faith who take the initiative in defining their own belonging to one faith community or another, and in asserting how and to what extent they belong.

This may indeed be a shift from Law to Grace – and to be a believer will be understood as a matter of grace rather than

of birth status or recognition by hierarchy. Let me conclude with an anecdote.

Platypus

I have just read a delightful children's story from an Australian aboriginal context which can be summarised as follows:

In the Dreamtime, when the Creator had made the different types of animals, mammals, fish, and birds, he found that there were a lot of bits and pieces left over. So he joined these bits and pieces together and created Platypus. And so Platypus has fur like a mammal, can swim under water, and mother platypus lays eggs like a bird.

Now the three groups of animals, mammals, fish and birds lived happily together to begin with, until they began to quarrel and fight because each group thought it was the best and the most important. The mammals thought they were special because only they had fur. Until Kangaroo's wife pointed out that Platypus has fur. So the mammals thought about this, and agreed to visit Platypus and ask him if he would join them in their fight against the fish and the birds. But Platypus just listened very carefully, and replied, "Thank you for asking me to be one of your family, I'll think about it."

Then the fish had a meeting; they thought they were special because only they can swim under water. But the Murray Cod's wife said, "What about Platypus? He spends most of his life under water." So the fish thought about this, and agreed to visit Platypus and ask him if he would join them in their fight against the mammals and the birds. But Platypus just listened very carefully, and replied, "Thank you for asking me to be one of your family, I'll think about it."

Then the birds held a meeting; they thought they were special because only they can fly and lay eggs. But Mrs Eagle pointed out that Mrs Platypus lays eggs. And so the birds thought about this, and agreed to visit

Platypus and ask him if he would join them in their fight against the mammals and the fish. But Platypus just listened very carefully, and replied, "Thank you for asking me to be one of your family, I'll think about it."

At last, in the cool of the evening, Platypus came out. All the animals fell silent. "I've made up my mind," Platypus said. "I am part of each of you and part of all of you. And that's how I want to stay. So thank you very much for asking me, but I've decided not to join any of you."

The animals didn't like this.

So Platypus went on: "Please let me explain. When the Creator first made us, he made each of us different. So each of us, in our own way, is special. But special doesn't mean better. None of us is better or worse than our neighbour. Only different. So we ought to respect each other's differences, and live together without fighting."

And when the animals thought about this, they agreed that Platypus was very wise, and had made a good decision.

And so it happened that an Aboriginal warrior overheard what Platypus had said, and so he made his people promise never to harm such a wise creature. Which is why no Aboriginal Australian will ever hunt and kill a Platypus – even if hungry.

Summarized from: Stories from the Billabong. By James Vance Marshall and Francis Firebrace. (London: Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 2008.)

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North East Indian Tribal Christianity and Traditional Practices: Implications for Theology of Religions Today

Lovely Awomi James

Introduction

India's North East region (comprising of 8 states), has a population of approximately 38,857,769 people and more than 250 ethnic tribes and speaking more than 350 different dialects.¹ With the advent of modernization and Christianity in the region, many changes have taken place in the lives of the people, in their culture and worldview. Many of the traditional beliefs, customs and practices have vanished, and thus it is no exaggeration when native tribes today critique the colonial/imperialistic Western powers, culture and religion for attempting to wipe out the indigenous culture and identity by imposing upon them a so-called "superior" Western/Christian culture. Nevertheless, no power or force on earth could ultimately sever the inherent tie between a people and its culture. Though much is lost with the passage of time, yet, some things are still preserved, as culture in its basic form is inextricably woven into the very life and blood of the people; it is culture that shapes and gives identity to the people. Hence, with regard to the subject of this paper, namely, North East Christianity, I would like to follow the presupposition that it has a hybrid character and form – of traditional tribal culture/religion and Christian faith, and its people draw their identity as native tribals and as tribal Christians. As Christians, their lives are rooted in the teachings and principles of Christian faith that is founded upon the Jesus Christ and rooted in the Bible; and as tribals, they draw their identity from their tribal roots, following their indigenous religio-cultural values, customs and practices.

Conversion to Christianity did not necessarily require a complete disassociation with the traditional religion and culture. In fact, tribal Christianity today is an in-

cultured form of Christianity; one that is rooted/sown into the religio-cultural context of tribals, though there remains a universally Western pull on Christianity. For our reflection, the paper is divided into two main areas: first, to show the traditional practices still kept by tribal Christians in the region and secondly, to explore a few implications that can be drawn from them in our attempt to work toward a theology of multi-religious belonging. Note that while there are many other traditional sources and elements still prevalent, considering the constraints of time and space, only a few are chosen for our study. Though this paper uses the term 'tribal(s)' to represent the tribal communities of North East India, the writer has mainly drawn her resources from her very own Naga tribal context, including her personal tribal knowledge and experience.

Hybridity in Relation to North East Tribal Christianity and Traditional Practices

Tradition of monotheistic belief of the tribals

Tribal worldview is centred upon the belief in the one Supreme God – the creator, author and owner of everything. This belief forms the basis of tribals' cultural-religious faith. They call this Supreme Being/God by different tribal names. However, the basic concept behind the different names and attributes is that He is the creator God of all things and everything in the universe belongs to Him. In the past, several scholars and writers (both native and non-native) in their zeal to bring out an exotic form of research work upon the "uncivilized" and "backward" indigenous tribals of the region, and in their excitement to exalt the "extraordinary" new-found faith called Christianity, they observed only the

apparent exterior picture of the religious life of the tribals and drew the hasty conclusion that tribal faith is an “animistic” religion. Tribal life and culture is woven around cosmic reality and its varied dynamics and life forms – the interconnectedness of all – the creator God or the divine with the world; the divine with humans; humans with fellow humans; and humans with the world of the cosmic environ that is all around them.

They believe in the existence of contradictory forces and powers in the world: the good and the bad; the beneficial and the harmful. They also believe in the existence of different worlds – the physical and the spiritual world. For them, each and every life form (humans, vegetation, animate and inanimate things) all have their inherent worth and each of them possess a life-giving and life-sustaining spirit/soul. In short, for the tribals of the region, everything big and small has a worthwhile life of its own – the mountains, the rivers and streams, trees, stones, the wind and the air, the animals, the birds, etc.

The belief in the spirit world thus forms an important part of their religion. They attribute all good things to being the blessings of the Supreme Being upon them. They also believe that there are both benevolent and malevolent spirits active and at work in the world. While the former are beneficent to their lives and to their work, the latter are potential threats to them and their existence. They respond to these two kinds of spirits differently. They offer sacrifices – animals, birds and vegetation or crops for the former – so that they can continue to receive their rich and bountiful favours. They also deal with the malevolent spirits and their potential dangers by appeasing them with sacrifices with the objective of warding them off far from their lives and their vicinity.² Thus, many draw the conclusion that the tribal religion is animism, implying that they worship the spirits (evil spirits in particular!).³ However, a closer and deeper look into the traditional religion of the tribals will reveal that they

did not worship the evil spirits, or any spirit for that matter. They never equate the spirits with the Supreme Being although He is also known as “the Supreme Spirit.” Their only object of worship is the Supreme Being and nothing else. When they acknowledge the harmful potential of some spirits, then they handle the danger in the way that they understand to be the proper way – to offer substitutory offerings to remove them from their lives. They believe they have the wisdom and potential to handle the forces of threats that come their way. The only God that they do worship is the Supreme Being, the Creator God. Tribals’ monotheistic belief has been established long before the coming of Christianity, and as such, Christianity cannot claim to be the benefactor of the tribals’ faith in one God.⁴ He is the One Ultimate or Supreme God/Spirit who resides in heaven and everything that happens in the world of creation happens under His knowledge and under His eyes.

As such, when Christianity came and introduced yet another similar idea of the one true God, the concept was not new at all for the tribals, and they gradually yet surely embraced the idea and the new faith. They still have a strong belief that there is only one true God, the creator of everything, even though peoples and cultures of different races, times and places call Him by different names. Even as Christians they still use the traditional names alongside “Jehovah” and the Triune God as “The Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

Practice of totemism

“Totemism” refers to the tribal belief and practice of identifying themselves with the world of nature through kinship. Certain groups, clans or families would trace their ancestral kinship relation with certain animals, birds, insects or plants or other inanimate objects (though very rare cases of inanimate objects). Therefore, any of the species or objects mentioned could be a totem for a group that believed to have descended from it – *mithun* (for the Thadaus), python (for the Chonthu Kuki

tribe), fish (for the Thauvu clan of Mizoram), cock or rooster (for the Harvano clan among the Tangkhuls of Manipur), mushroom (for the Mikrisunoumi clan of Chakhesang Nagas), sparrow (for the Kichu clan of the Ao Nagas), etc.⁵ For some, they would not harm or eat the meat of their totemic animals or creatures as they hold each other as brothers and sisters. On the other hand, some would harm or eat the meat of their totemic animals, because of their belief that it would bring power and blessings. Even today, this belief and practice is still maintained by many tribal Christians, especially those that take their traditional religious and cultural identity very seriously. For them, this does not in any way hamper their Christian faith and life as it simply reveals and establishes the familial relationship between humans and the natural world as members of the same family/household of the creator God.

Practice of taboos

“Taboos” refer to the practice of forbidding people (individuals or groups) from eating, touching, saying and doing certain things. Tribal life and culture is full of taboos of various kinds in the past. Taboos are also divided according to classifications: general taboos for everyone in the community/tribe/clan, etc.; taboos for men; taboos for women; and even taboos for children (these are not as strict). For instance, no one (man or woman) should steal from a neighbour; no one should bear false testimony against his/her neighbour, against the earth or against the natural world (this taboo is still practiced). Taboos for men include: (1) going and burning the fields or forests (to clear them for cultivation) during their wives’ confinement during pregnancy. Breaking this taboo means the child will be born with black patches on his/her body parts; (2) if the husband kills a snake, the baby will be born with the marks of serpent scales on his/her body (still practiced by some); (3) the husband is forbidden to go hunting and if he accidentally kills a pregnant animal, his wife and the unborn child will be put to

unknown risks (still practiced); (4) it is taboo for men to touch women’s clothing or weaving tools owing to the belief that it will bring bad luck⁶; (5) it is also taboo for men to have physical relations with the wives just before going to war/headhunting, as they will be unable to take enemies’ heads or may even fall into the hands of their enemies, etc.

Taboos for women include: (1) touching the weapons and hunting tools of men, for it will bring bad luck to their men (still practiced – especially if the weapons are preserved for warfare); (2) walking into an assembly of men during an all-men council (still practiced); (3) dietary taboos for pregnant women e.g. eating monkey meat, chicken legs/feet, meat of any blemished animals, etc. (still practiced by some); (4) taboos for pregnant women visiting the dead or accidents and even if they come in close eye contact with ugly or deformed humans/animals (still practiced by many).

These traditional taboos still have a strong place in tribal society although many of them have been rendered irrelevant in this day and age. Traditional taboos continue to bind many tribal Christians who strongly hold onto their tribal culture and traditions. Some of them are harmful when applied stringently, yet many of them have the potential to protect, build and sustain life or the integral relationship between the creator God, humans and nature. Thus, Liangao Soto observes that taboos not only sustain and preserve nature, animals, humans and human culture, but they also maintain the theo-anthropo, theo-cosmo and anthropo-cosmo as well as intra-anthropo integral relationships.⁷

Traditional festivals and Christianity

Tribals love festivities and celebrations of any kind. Festivals in particular are times of thanksgiving, of celebrating life and its uncountable blessings, of giving praise and adoration to the Supreme Being, of sharing, of singing, of dancing, of courting, of friendship, of reminiscing the past, of experiences and joy, of looking forward to a

better and brighter future, of building relationships, of mending strained relationships and of acknowledging and welcoming one another (including guests and strangers) into their midst. Traditional festivals were always celebrated with religious and spiritual meanings for the tribals. Their festivals are mostly centred on the divine-human-nature interconnected and interdependent relationship. Most of their festivals are organized around the important blessings of the natural world – different seasons, different vegetation, crops or produce, stages of cultivation, etc. All of them include elements of thanksgiving and seek further blessings from the Supreme Being and from the benevolent spirits.

Some of the traditional festivals still actively celebrated by tribal Christians are Tuluni (post-sowing festival of the Sumi Nagas), Alaonii (post-transplanting festival of the Poumai Nagas of Manipur), Sekreni (post-harvest/thanksgiving festival of the Angamis, Chakesang and almost all of the Tenyimi Naga tribes), and Wangala (post-harvest/thanksgiving festival of the Garos of Meghalaya). In all of these festivals celebrated today, the name of the Almighty God is invoked, praised and adored and thanksgivings ascribed to Him and are thus celebrated with great gaiety.

Feast of Merit and its Influence upon Tribal Christians

A little mention of the Feast of Merit is required here to show how its influence is translated into the Christian holidays of Christmas, New Years and Easter among the tribal Christians today. Traditionally, the Feasts of Merit and the practice of headhunting occupy a central place in the cultural life of the Nagas. For any Naga man, to accomplish these two meritorious performances would be nothing short of attaining the highest possible feat in the community. These two deeds were considered the highest achievements in a man's life.⁸ The term "Feast of Merit" was introduced by anthropologists and sociologists who tried to devise an English equivalent of the Naga concept of the grand

ceremonial feast given by the wealthy men in the village for the acquisition of popularity and status in the community.⁹

There are several stages of the Feast of Merit, differing from tribe to tribe, and each has a series of ceremonies and sacrifices connected with it. The climax of the Feast of Merit centres on the sacrifice of the *mithun*, which marks the distinctive status of the host in the village or society.¹⁰ Generally speaking, the host spends a huge measure of his wealth to sponsor the feast.¹¹

It should be noted that only men and only married men could perform the Feast of Merit. One possible reason could be because a married man is one who has advanced in age, in experience and in achievements, and one who has settled well with a wife, children and male children in particular (to carry his name and blood to the future generation). It has also been inferred that the reason only married men can perform the Feast because of the wife's important role and responsibility to prepare the feast.¹²

A man can perform as many Feasts of Merit as is possible in his lifetime. Each successive Feast elevates his status and position in the village. In addition, his family as well as his entire village also benefit in the process: his wife, children and relatives can also be bask in the pride of being connected to him,¹³ and as the host offers sacrifices to the spirits, his village is also generally blessed with well being and prosperity.

Today, this Feast of Merit no longer exists in its original form but it has somewhat translated itself into the celebration of Christian holidays as mentioned above. In villages, every year, either the chief of the village or some wealthy men (at times as many as 3 to 4 people) host a Christmas celebration and ensure that it becomes a week-long celebration. The basic objective of the host would be to host the birth of the Saviour of the world, Jesus Christ, but it also entails their social recognition, respect and status in the community as someone who is wealthy, dignified and generous before the eyes of others. Whether or not it has a pure

motive and outcome is debated, but it suffices for us to see that the tribal traditional practice of the Feast of Merit has not altogether disappeared, as some may be tempted to believe.

Practice of shamanism in tribal Christian society

“Shamanism” is understood as a psychosomatic phenomenon in which a person, the “shaman”, is believed to have contact with the divine, the spirit or spirits and who has been chosen by the deity or the spirit to be a mouthpiece – revealing otherwise unknowable things, healing, communing with the dead, mediating and negotiating between the world of the spirit and the physical, living world.¹⁴ Shamanism in tribal society was very religious in nature, as it integrated the divine, human, spirit and the natural worlds. However, with the coming of Christianity in the region it was discouraged and condemned as an evil phenomenon and practice. This could be mainly due to the fact that the early Christian missionaries held everything non-Christian to be an evil threat to the Gospel – the one true Gospel, the only authority, the only true and superior religion.¹⁵ As such, and without any serious consideration or study of its positive values, shamanism lost its popularity.

However, it can be argued that the presence, influence and activities of shamanism can still be found in the lives of the tribal Christians. Without going into detail, let us examine a few practices that clearly demonstrate that it is still practiced and embraced by tribal Christians today.

Revealing the otherwise unknown things

Whenever individuals, livestock or assets are missing or lost, tribals still confer with the shamans in the villages to assist them in tracing what is lost. The shamans perform certain rituals; they go into a communing trance and come back to reality with the answers concerning the whereabouts of the lost object or person, or provide information on its condition (whether it

died naturally or was killed, etc.), including the identity(ies) of the culprit(s) or forces responsible for the disappearance.

Communing with the dead

In instances when the spirit of a dead loved one in the family disturbs the home or family, the surviving members often approach the shaman to commune with the dead, in order to discover what the dead spirit wishes to communicate or why it is still hovering and causing disturbances. After the shaman identifies the reason, the family does whatever is necessary for the soul of the dead one to leave the world of the living peacefully and leave the family to carry on with their lives in peace. There are also instances when, immediately following the death of someone in the family, if one of the surviving members suddenly falls ill without any naturally-explainable cause, the family would seek the help of the shaman. The shaman would in turn go into communion with the dead and sometimes discover that the soul of the sick has been trapped by the spirit of the dead due to their close attachment in life. The shaman would then negotiate with the dead and bring back the trapped soul of the sick and restore him/her back to health and life.

Rescuing the lost soul of an individual from the clutches of the jungle spirits

There are also instances when someone returns from the field or forest, falls ill and becomes delirious and almost lifeless. The shamans help perform the necessary rituals by going to the area where the victim had been, offering some substitutory sacrifice (e.g. cock, egg, small animal) to the field or jungle spirit who has trapped the soul of the victim. The shaman then calls out the name of the victim and in a slow, undisturbed walk ushers the lost soul back home, after which the sick will return to his/her healthy normal self.

For the Sumi Naga tribe, a shaman is called *tu-umi* (one who communes with the world of the spirit and the dead). The first known *tu-umi* among the Sumis were women, and there were two in particular; namely,

Tughunakha and Yesheli.¹⁶ It is believed that after these two pioneering *tu-umi* among the Sumis, many others then followed – both men and women. However, an interesting aspect here is that sometimes, in the absence of a proper *tu-umi*/shaman, a church pastor or an elder in the village or family may perform the necessary ritual and attain the desired results.¹⁷ This is an area that requires us to reflect anew: the impact of shamanism and its influence upon the tribal Christians. Shamanism bridges the gap between different worlds, beings and entities; it connects the divine (for it is believed that the Supreme Being is the one who gives this gift and power of shamanism) with humans and the world of creation, thus bringing in an interconnected relationship of healing, security, deliverance, protection and mutual co-existence.

Omens and dreams

Tribals were, and are still to some extent, superstitious (if by “superstitious” we mean they listen to or heed the voices and events of nature as a communication or especially a forewarning about events or phenomena to come). Omens and dreams play a very important role in their day-to-day lives. Omens are signs that are read and interpreted by observing or confronting various natural or supernatural events. They can be either positive or negative signs. For instance, if a tribal man is on the verge of or on the way to some important expedition, and a wild cat crosses his path, then it is considered a bad omen of impending failure, accidents or even death. Hence, the man in question would refrain from venturing out.¹⁸ Or if one trips or stumbles as one is about to step out from one’s home, it is also taken as a bad omen. In another example: if one hears the unusual sound of a wooden board being hammered in the night it is taken to be a sign of the hammering of coffins, and thus somebody from the community is expected to die that night or the next day.

Dreams, likewise, are taken very seriously by the tribals of the region even today. Dreams that involve the digging of earth are

interpreted as an impending death in the family (it is symbolic of digging a burial place). Dreams of fishing, for some, mean that money or blessings will be received, and for some it could mean sickness. Dreams of dropping off or seeing off a dear one across streams or rivers imply that the one who is departing will die. Dreams about the falling off or shaving of one’s hair imply impending humiliation or shame. Dreams about flying or climbing can imply success and achievement. However, each element in a dream may have different interpretations and relevance for different individuals, groups and tribes according to the prevalent beliefs. In any event, tribals take their dreams very seriously and they still seek their meanings from dream experts or they often times interpret their own dreams according to the prevalent meanings – although now in the case of a negative dream, many tribals call on the name of the triune God or Jesus and seek protection against impending danger.

Increased turning towards traditional resources

In light of the aforementioned practices, there is today a strong movement of tribals in the region (native scholars, researchers and writers, mostly from the theological field) deeply committed to revisiting the traditional cultures and religions in order to revive, conserve and draw new interpretations for application today. Some of the important tribal traditions and elements being revived today are as follows:

1. *Pukbreila*¹⁹ and *Inalimi/Amukisbilimi*²⁰ (daughters in-law who are married to, and taken from, different villages or communities) as “peacemaking personnel” in conflict situations between villages and tribes²¹
2. The use of amulets or charms – sacred objects for use against evil, danger, impending danger, sickness, etc. For example, tortoise shells, tiger claws²², or the use of certain bird claws (such as the kingfisher) to prevent one from choking on fish bones while eating fish²³

3. Barren fruit trees or plants considered 'male plants' can bear fruit after one ties a woman's *mekhala* (sarong or wrap) around the tree or plant²⁴
4. Child-rearing traditions and values from traditional cultures; such as a value placed on close children/grandparent relationships or a communal "ownership" or responsibility towards all children in the community²⁵
5. Communitarian values such as selflessness and the service of others before one's self, altruism, a respect for elders, etc. – *Akukhu-Aye* (a Sumi Naga term), *Sobaliba* (an Ao Naga term) and *Tlawmngaihna* (a Mizo term)
6. Eco-spirituality from varied tribal traditions²⁶

Hospitality between North East Christianity and People of Other Faiths

With the exception of those early days when the first few converts to Christianity were persecuted by the then majority of tribal religious adherents, led by the village headmen and elders, the region has not seen much animosity played out between the two groups, especially with the increase of the Christian population. Once the tribal chiefs converted, or once the heads of the clans and families converted, there was no question that the rest would follow suit. One positive aspect of the tribal Christians is that they do not take advantage of being the religious majority over minority groups. They live peacefully and cordially with people of the traditional faith and belief. For instance, among some of the traditional believers in the villages, there are those who believe in "lycanthropy". Lycanthropy is a phenomenon where a person can live the mythical life of a counterpart animal spirit; for example, a tiger, snake or bird. The human and the animal part both share the same cravings, injuries, wounds, etc. They can be very possessive and caring of the ones whom they love and for whom they care (family members or friends) and so they look out for their safety and protection. For example, they would surreptitiously

accompany and guard them on their travel/journey, warding off evil spirits from attacking or harming their protected ones. On the other hand, they can also be very dangerous to those that displease them e.g. scaring them and destroying their homes or property in the dead of the night.

However, except on rare occasions when someone unintentionally displeases them and invites their tantrums, tribal Christians and adherents of primal religion (those with special spirits or powers as well as regular adherents) live together in harmonious, non-interference, cordial and mutually-respectful relationships with one another. Each go about their own way of life although the Christians do not cease their attempts to convert the others to Christianity. There were and are families who live together under the same family structure and in the same compound while being members of different faiths – Christianity and tribal religion.

There is another aspect of the relationship of hospitality between tribal Christians and people of other faiths in the region. This is the peaceful co-existence of Christians and Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Sikhs, and Buddhists, among others. While many conservative Christians consider non-Christians to be doomed for destruction and call them as "idolaters" and "worshippers of the devil", etc., as far as their personal relationship is concerned, it is one of mutual friendship and hospitality. During festive occasions such as parties, Christmas, New Years and Easter celebrations, non-Christian neighbours, colleagues and friends are always welcomed and given special treatments; the others likewise return the same honour to tribal Christians. Festive exchanges of gifts are an integral part of all festivals and celebrations.

In the tribal Christian context of the North East region, one rarely ever hears of or witnesses communal tensions or violent conflicts on the basis of differences in faith or religion. One obvious reason for this could be because the tribal population are

peace-loving, friendly and hospitable toward their neighbours.

Implications for a Theology of Religions Today

For tribals, traditional culture and religion serve as their roots and the Christian Gospel is translated and interpreted into their cultural settings and real life experiences, giving meaning and guiding them in their day-to-day lives. Reflecting upon those traditional elements and practices discussed in this paper, let us review some of their implications for a theology of religions in the multi-religious and multicultural context of India:

1. Tribal worldview (understanding of life and reality): a tribal view of a webbed relationship helps them to acknowledge that there is an unending spiritual bond between the divine, humans and the natural world. The divine is understood in terms of the one Supreme Being over all of creation; His being and His functions are seen and experienced through diverse manifestations of His sovereignty and blessings. The rest of His creation – varied life forms and species – is viewed as family members of the one household of God. Each and every entity created by the creator God has inherent worth and meaning. Besides the material, physical world, there is the world of the spirits – the unseen world filled with powerful forces and influences that humans are well-advised to respect and acknowledge for their beneficent ways. At the same time, we must be cautious and vigilant of their maleficent ways by dealing responsibly with them.
2. Traditional practice of totemism: while many Christians may not wholly receive the idea that tribals trace human ancestry to certain non-human creatures, this belief helps tribals maintain a close and respectful relationship with the world of nature around them; it helps them realize that all life forms are interconnected, precious and belong to the one family of creation. It also engenders in them a spirit of sensitivity, protectiveness and conservation of animal and natural life forms.
3. The practice of taboos: while such practices are not taken to an extreme level, so as to consume one's entire life with (sometimes) irrational fear, tribal Christians integrate some taboos with Christian moral and ethical principles vis-à-vis the realm of inter-human and human-divine and human-nature relationship.
4. Tribal festivals and feasts: these events help instil communal values, such as the principle of sharing, the attribution of all material wealth to the generous providence of God, the importance of building and strengthening relationships at an individual and communal level, and the expression and translation of hospitality into the best of actions – giving and sharing, celebrating the spirit of joy and merrymaking in various forms of games, songs, dances and common meals.
5. Tribal religious practices of shamanism: this bridges the gap between the different worlds – what is divine, human, nature, the spirits, and the dead or afterlife. These practices manifest the amazing gifts of the divine to humans for the purpose of greater good – as a medium of revelation, of healing, deliverance, of communing with the otherwise unknowable world of the spirits and the dead – revealing the integral relationship of all of reality.
6. Omens, dreams and amulets: tribal Christians hold onto some of the traditional media of revelation such as omens, dreams and amulets, which signify the religious and spiritual truth that God has given immeasurable potential and blessings through His many wonders of creation – that each and every creature and object created by Him, including the different states of existence, are endowed with His many good and beneficial purposes. Tribal Christians thus maintain sensitivity to

the varied voices of nature and their significance for their lives, and utilize their guiding signs and messages for protection, security and blessing.

7. Traditional cultural values such as selflessness or the service of others (altruism) and respect (reverence) of elders: these values beautifully integrate and promote Christian principles of love, honour, respect, selfless service, humility, compassion towards the needy, and moral/ethical codes of conduct in day-to-day living as followers of Christ – the supreme example.
8. Tribal eco-spirituality: these beliefs enhance Christian relationship with and responsibility toward the world of nature – upon which our survival, health, prosperity and our very existence depend. The creation-centred worldview and culture of the tribals has immense potential to contribute toward mending the broken (and still-breaking) relationship of humanity with the ecosystem.
9. The mutually-friendly and hospitable relationship of the tribal Christians with those from other faiths and cultures: these relationships could also be considered significant as we ponder the reality of our pluralistic setting. Some debatable questions could include: Is this due to the generally friendly disposition of the tribals? Or could it be because the majority of the tribals in the region are Christians? Or is it due to the fact that tribals (having had a long history of being subjugated and marginalized) understand the plight of their minority neighbours and groups? Is it because they truly understand the truth of reality as interconnected and interdependent at all levels? Whatever the reason – even if it is due to some or all of the reasons cited – the important thing for us to understand is that harmonious co-existence, mutual respect and the realization and experience of mutual enrichment should be at the foundation of all relationships, irrespective of difference.

Tribal Christians uphold their hybrid cultural and religious identity by being harmoniously integrating within their present setting. Of course, they at times may go through an experience of belonging “neither here nor there”, in which they feel or come to a “this-is-an-altogether-different” belief or practice, or they develop a “third identity” of sorts. There can be real moments of confusion in relation to one’s hybrid state of experience and identity. However, for the tribal Christians of the region, their present cultural and religious hybridity ultimately enriches them to challenge not only the history of Western imperialistic culture²⁷ that comes alongside Christianity, but also their own traditional cultures and religions as they question and put to test some of the more “negatively” received traditions and practices in favour of biblical faith and teachings. As such, hybridity as a theoretical and practical framework within the tribal experience allows them to deconstruct belief systems and practices that are destructive on both sides, and to embrace and reconstruct those that are life-affirming for both themselves and their communities – giving them the divine blessing of the right to choose and to thus choose to live right with God, with fellow humans and with nature.

In the words of Amardeep Singh:

In thinking about religious hybridity, the question is usually not whether or not someone converts to a foreign or imposed religious belief system, but how different belief systems interact with traditions and local cultural-religious frameworks.²⁸

Conclusion

Exploring hybridity and embracing hospitality can contribute much toward making our multicultural and multi-religious co-existence peaceful and enriching. Hybridity is not some far off and yet-to-happen phenomenon but is a reality today – it is the very character of our world, whether or not we acknowledge and embrace it. The subject of hybridity and hospitality for a theology of multi-religious belonging

therefore refers to the reality and experience that go beyond the level of conversion/converts and inter-racial-ethnic and interfaith marriages and onto a deeper personal, spiritual and practical level wherein we encounter, experience and enrich ourselves from diverse beliefs, faiths and cultural practices. This eventually leads us to live as responsible, sensitive, respectful, spiritual and better human beings – ones at home with others and accepted and accepting of others in the multicultural and multi-religious contexts in which we live today. Therefore, the call is to shift away from a traditionally “closed” Christian approach to an “open” one if we are to contribute toward making our society and our world a just and peaceful place for all of God’s children, irrespective of all temporal differences and contradictions.

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¹ The tribal population in the eight states of the region are as follows: Assam 12.42%; Arunachal Pradesh 64.63%; Manipur 38.96%; Nagaland 88.98%; Meghalaya 86.42%; Mizoram 94.19%; Sikkim 20.61%; and Tripura 31.13%. Cf. “State wise Tribal Population percentage in India – Ministry of Tribal Affairs.” *Tribal Cultural Heritage in India Foundation Website*. Web. 18 September 2014. www.indiantribalheritage.org.

² Cf. Angeline Lotsūro, *The Nagas: A Missionary Challenge* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute Publication, 2000), 20.

³ Even the natives were indoctrinated by the early Christian missionaries to believe that they (tribals) were worshippers of spirits, stones and trees; the Christians thus called their traditional religion “animistic.”

⁴ Cf. V. K. Nuh, *Origin of the Nagas* (Kohima: Vision Press, 2002), 35.

⁵ Cf. A. Wati Longchar, *The Traditional Tribal Worldview and Modernity* (Jorhat: N. Limala Longkumer, 1995), 60.

⁶ Cf. Kezhalezo Angami, “Taboo - Kenyū in the Context of the Angami Nagas” in Razouselie Lasetso and Eyingbeni Hümtsoe (eds.), *Doing Tribal Christian Theology with Tribal Resources: Cultural Resources from North East India* (Jorhat: ETC Programme Coordination, 2009), 75.

⁷ Cf. S. Liangao Soto, *Tribal Theology of Integral Humanhood: A Resource from Shamanism of the Nagas* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2011), 71.

⁸ Joseph S. Thong, *Head-Hunters’ Culture: Historic Culture of Nagas* (Tseminyu: Khinyi Woch, 1997), 19.

⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰ Interview with Ghokhevi Sumi, Assistant G. B., Shokhevi Village, 23 September 2014.

¹¹ Thong, *op. cit.*, 20.

¹² Cf. *Ibid.*, 20.

¹³ Interview with Henivi Sumi, Assistant G. B., Shokhevi Village, 25 September 2014.

¹⁴ Cf. Soto, *op. cit.*, 1-2.

¹⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶ Cf. Zuheto K. Swu, *Sumi Xu’ Gbili* (N.p.: 2003), 147-149, cited in Zakali Shohe, “Locating the Role of Tuumi in the Traditional Sumi Naga Society: Towards Building a Theology of Relationship” in Razouselie Lasetso and Eyingbeni Hümtsoe (eds.), *Doing Tribal Theology with Tribal Resources: Cultural Resources from North East India*, Tribal Study Series No.18 (Jorhat: ETC Programme Coordination, 2009), 105.

¹⁷ This view is based on a real life incident in the family of the present writer whence her younger sister happened to be the victim in question.

¹⁸ Cf. Sashikaba Kechutzar, “Omen, Divination and Dream (Tatakrutsū, Antokdangba/Amsū and Pongmang): Medium for Divine Revelation” in Razouselie Lasetso (ed.), *Garnering Tribal Resources for Doing Tribal Christian Theology*, Tribal Study Series No.16 (Jorhat: ETC Programme Coordination, 2008), 325.

¹⁹ *Pukreila* is a Tangkhul Naga term for the daughters-in-law who are from other villages; it holds the same meaning as the Sumi Naga term *Inalimi*.

²⁰ *Inalimi/Amukishilimi* is a Sumi Naga term that holds the same meaning as the aforementioned term *Pukbreila*.

²¹ Cf. Yangkahao Vashum, “Pukhreila and Aksū: Tribal Theology of Peacemaking” in Yangkahao Vashum and Woba James (eds.), *Peacemaking in North East India: Social and Theological Exploration*, Tribal Study Series No.21 (Jorhat: TSC, ETC, 2012), 233-246.

²² The writer's own children use this around their necks today.

²³ If one gets a fishbone stuck inside one's throat, someone with the claw can come and touch the patient's throat with it in a downward sweeping motion and he/she can be cured immediately. The surprising thing about this practice is that even if the helper does not have a claw in hand, if this person happened to have killed/caught a bird, he/she could do the curing with his/her bare hands.

²⁴ This has also been witnessed successfully by the writer in her own garden.

²⁵ Cf. Razouselie Lasetso, I. Toshi Jamir and Woba James (eds.), *Nurturing Children in the Tribal Society of North East India: A Search for Values*, Tribal Study Series No.23 (Jorhat: ILEMA, 2014).

²⁶ To better understand tribal ecological traditions and values cf. Razouselie Lasetso,

Marlene Ch. Marak and Yangkahao Vashum, (eds.), *Tribal Ecology: A Search for Ecological Values from the Cultures and Practices of the Tribes of North East India*, Tribal Study Series No.20 (Jorhat: ETC Programme Coordination, 2012).

²⁷ Haj Yazdiha says, "hybridity has the ability to empower the marginalized collective and deconstruct bounded labels, which are used in the service of subordination..." Cf. Haj Yazdiha, "Conceptualizing Hybridity: Deconstructing Boundaries through the Hybrid." *Open Journal Systems Website*. Public Knowledge Project. Web. 28 September 2014. <http://ojs.gc.cuny.edu/index.php/formations/article/download/673/864>.

²⁸ Cf. Amardeep Singh, "Mimicry and Hybridity in Plain English." *Amardeep Singh Blog*. Lehigh University. Web. 28 September 2014. www.lehigh.edu/~amsp/2009/05/mimicry-and-hybridity-in-plain-english.html.

Body Discourse in 1 Corinthians: Exploring Hybridity and Embracing Hospitality— towards a Theology of Multiple Religious Belonging

K. Balakrishnan

Introduction

The intermingling of the Hellenistic and Jewish cultures had a strong influence over the life and work of Paul. Although Paul was a Jewish man, he was raised in the Hellenistic city of Tarsus. His encounter with the living Christ on the road to Damascus brought a greater understanding of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. In his writings, Paul employed a plethora of metaphors such as "in Christ", "the people of God", and the Adam/Christ comparison in order to delineate the corporate identity of the community. Of all these metaphors, Paul's discourse on and use of the body metaphor assumes greater significance. Hence, this paper is an attempt to examine Paul's discourse on the body and locate a point of convergence through which I can engage with the theme: hybridity, hospitality and multiple religious belonging.

The Social Dimension of the Community in Corinth

Prior to locating Paul's discourse on the body, it is important to ascertain the social diversity of the Corinthian community. In his book *Light from the Ancient East*, G. A. Deissmann comments:

*The early Christians were of the lower social classes – peasants, slaves, and artisans. It was a movement among the weary and heavy-laden men and women without power and position, babes, as Jesus himself calls them as the poor, the base, and the foolish.*¹

This view generalizes the fact that the early Christians only hailed from the lower strata of society. However, the textual data in I Cor 1:26-28 and I Cor 7:21-23 point to the diversity of the society to which Paul was writing, comprised of the wise, the powerful, the poor, the weak, domestic

slaves, etc. Given this data, a plausible conclusion is that the members of the Corinthian community hailed from various social and cultural strata; the Corinthian Christians apparently varied from quite poor to rather well off. With regard to this point, W. A. Meeks points out that the Pauline communities were composed of a social cross section of urban society. According to Meeks, "the most active and prominent members of Paul's circle are people of high status in inconsistency."² He further comments: "They are weak in terms of social power and status... yet they are exhilarated by experiences of power in their meetings."³ This allows us to infer that the Corinthians Christians did not emerge from one single cultural identity but emerged from a hybrid of cultures: Jewish and Hellenistic.

Paul's Discourse on the Body as Affirming Cultural Hybridity

Body politic in a stratified Roman Empire

In order to understand the body discourse in I Corinthians, it is necessary to understand the body politic in the Roman Empire. In the Roman political world, the body was seen as the state. It is interesting to note that the body was perceived as a symbol of society. Mary Douglas describes the notion of the body as a symbol of social structure as such:

*...the body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva, and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body.*⁴

This helps us understand how the body served as symbol of complex societal structures for the Romans. More specifically, the symbol of the body interpreted rituals. This further pushes us to locate Paul's discourse on the body within the power structures of the Roman Empire and its policy of social stratification. The Mediterranean world in which the biblical message was grounded was a stratified world.⁵ It is important to note the key factors that determined the stratification in the Roman world: power and privilege. The use of power by the powerful spawned a wide gap between the powerful and the powerless. Furthermore, the use of power often served to justify domination and subordination. D. G. Horrell remarks:

*The social structure of the empire as a whole is probably best visualized as a large pyramid; a representation of a system in which power, wealth and status are concentrated heavily within tiny ruling elite who comprise at most around one percent of the empire's population.*⁶

This illuminates that power, wealth and status always remained with the ruling elite. When it came to social stratification in Roman society, three variables were used to refer to one's status: economic class (one's access to wealth and the means of production), status (prestige, noble birth) and power. These variables were maximized among the Roman and provincial aristocrats to a remarkable degree that one's status to a higher level greatly depended on these factors.⁷ This explains the manner in which the ruling elites enjoyed status and privilege.

This brief description demonstrates how Roman hegemony and power further stratified the society. In the Roman world, the body was used to support the existing system of dominance and power. This is clearly seen in the writing of M. Agrippa, who draws an analogy between the state and the human body in which the members or parts represent the quarrelling parties or factions in the state. With this analogy, he instructs the revolting plebeians to cease their strife and be united with the Patricians

by submitting to their authority. His argument speaks about the rebellion of hands, mouth and feet against the stomach, which weakens the whole body.⁸ This analogy reflects the politics of domination and subordination in the Roman Empire.

Body discourse as resistance of the powerful and recognition of the weak

Having understood the body politic in the Roman world, it is important to examine Paul's discourse on the body in I Corinthians, although the body discourse is also found in other epistles, such as in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4. Paul's employment of the body metaphor assumes particular significance in I Corinthians 12, which depicts the body as comprising of multiple members such as a head, eyes, mouth, stomach, hands, foot, genitals, etc. This anatomical description of the body shows the diversity and multiplicity of the members in the human body. All members ought to work for the better coordination of the body. In this, Paul points out the weaker or lesser members of the society as being integral to human body. This approach is dissimilar to the body politic of the Roman Empire wherein the weaker serve the greater. D. B. Martin observes:

*Paul's use of body imagery is at variance with usual use of such imagery. Instead of using it to support an existing social hierarchy where the lesser members of societies serve the greater, Paul uses it to relativise the sense of self-importance of those of higher status, making them see the importance and necessity of the weaker, lower status Corinthian Christians. Paul questions the usual liking of the high social status and honour by saying that God gives more honour to the less presentable members.*⁹

He urges the strong to give more honour and respect to the weak, and to cease their factious behaviour. It is the "more respectable members" (I Cor 12:24) toward whom the argument is directed, since they are the ones who might be tempted to say to the weak "I have no need of you."

The weaker ones in the Corinthian community are described as weak and poor

people with a weak conscience, non-entities and foolish. The greater ones are described as wise, mighty and strong. Paul's equation of the weak also relates to *humiliores*, those of lowly birth and status, and the higher ones were called *honestiores*, possessors of honour (upper class). This social categorization in the Roman Empire, in P. F. Esler's opinion, exposes the grim reality of the ruling elite of Greco-Roman society that looked down on the vast masses of the population. *Humiliores* were referred to as "the filth and dregs of the society."¹⁰ In this context, the body discourse serves as a means to resist the power politics of the higher class in the Roman Empire. By perceiving the lesser members as equally important in the human anatomy of the body, Paul gives importance to their being and portrays their participation in the body as integral. It is in giving this due recognition that Paul expresses his solidarity with the weak. By recognizing the weaker as greater, Paul posed challenges to the abusive power structures both in the Corinthian community and the Roman Empire.

An affirmation of both unity and diversity – towards locating multiple identities

In his discourse on the body, Paul is concerned with two issues: diversity in unity and unity in diversity.¹¹ "Just as the body is one and has many members... so also is Christ (I Cor 12:12). According to James D. G. Dunn, the body in Paul's letters serves as "a vital expression of the unity of the community despite the diversity of its members."¹² However, the principle of unity outlined here does not seek to erase the diversity of its members. Although Paul mentions the diversity of the members' functions and the interdependence of the members, the diverse members are also invited to embrace egalitarian life. In I Cor 12:13, Paul remarks: "For One spirit we were all baptized into one body; Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Paul importantly portrays diversity as a gift given to the community. This diversity is rightly understood as a gift – an expression of grace given in various gifts¹³ (I Cor 12:1-11; 27-30). The multi-dimensionality of the gifts is made accessible to different members, irrespective of gender, race, class, caste, colour, etc. Feminist theologian E. Fiorenza addresses Paul's writings on this point to show how women – then and now – have an equal space and access to the multifarious gifts of the Holy Spirit:

In the messianic body all have equal access to the gifts of the Spirit. The equality in the spirit does not mean all are the same. Rather, the gifts of the members vary and their individual functions are irreplaceable. The functions, though different, are equally important for the building of the corporation. Solidarity and collaboration are the civic virtues in the political order (politeuma of Christ) which is best characterised as a "pneumatic" or charismatic democracy.¹⁴

This view expresses the point that the gifts accentuate the principles of diversity, equality, solidarity and collaboration.

Taking this discussion of diversity to the level of cultural and ethnic identity, I agree with scholar Daniel Darko's affirmation that the body of Christ is a union made of multi-ethnic identities. However, such a union does not rule out individual ethnicities. In this regard, Darko comments: "the nuance is that ethno racial identity is rather 'subsumed under a higher name, one new person'"¹⁵ (Eph. 2:15). This multi-ethnic identity is better understood when we balance the theological duality of unity and diversity. Furthermore, I believe it can serve as a helpful model for understanding multi-ethnic identities in various religious communities.

Broken Body Discourse as Envisioning and Embracing Hospitality

Social disparity

Following an introduction to Paul's discourse on the body, I now turn Paul's description of the broken body of Jesus

Christ found in I Corinthians 11:17-34. This section provides a narrative account of certain issues and dangers relating to the abuse of the Lord's Supper. The abuses to which Paul refers can be attributed to the social disparity between the rich and the poor Christians in Corinth; between those who had enough food and those who had nothing (v.22). Each one takes his own supper and one is hungry while another is drunk (v.21). The rich were beginning their meal before the poor arrived (vv.33-34). These texts delineate the stark differences between the groups. The "haves" have their own houses whereas the "have-nots" may be without houses (vv.22-23). From these data, one can understand that the Lord's Supper was not celebrated in an orderly manner (v.20).

It appears that there were some social dynamics that contributed to the division at the table. This is rightly pointed out by G. Theissen, who remarks that common meals were hosted by the wealthier Christians in their own homes. But for Christians who hailed from a higher social status, the best food was kept for their social peers and poor quality food was provided for their social inferiors and clients. Hence, he argues that divisions existed between the relatively well to-do and the poor.¹⁶ It is because of this social disparity between the rich and the poor that some treated the agape meal as an ordinary meal. Theissen was by no means the first to recognize that the division at the Lord's Supper in Corinth was essentially between the rich and poor.¹⁷ Although the social stratification may be the cause for the division, it is the selfish behaviour of the Corinthian rich that polluted the Eucharist and rendered it so ineffective.¹⁸ Whatever the reason for this activity, it becomes clear that the Corinthian congregation did not celebrate the Lord's Supper as a normal meal.¹⁹ This is obviously seen in Paul's words (11:17): "when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse." What was considered to be holy became a means of power used for destruction. Hence, the manner and attitude in which the

Lord's Supper was celebrated became a matter of concern to Paul.

Broken body of Christ as experiencing God's vulnerability and solidarity with the other

Having observed the discrimination against and disrespect towards the have-nots, Paul interweaves traditions of the Passover meal and the agape meal with the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is called a sacred meal because it is called the Lord's meal. Paul also draws a demarcation between the Lord's meal and eating a meal to satiate one's hunger. In the observation of the Lord's meal, Paul insists that the members eat together, with members waiting until everyone is present (11:33-34).²⁰ This meal assumes greater importance in "coming together" (10:17; 11:18, 20, 33, 34). It is in the act of coming together that sharing in one bread and one cup assumes significance (10:16-17). The rationale in coming together is to eat in togetherness. In this context, the eating of the bread and the drinking of the cup assume focus (11:25). While eating the bread symbolizes the death of Jesus, drinking from the cup points to the blood of Jesus Christ. Both elements draw us to encounter the broken body of Christ at the Lord's Supper. It is through the broken body of Jesus that God shares his vulnerability and solidarity with the vulnerable, broken community.

Two prominent Christian theologians, namely, J. Moltmann and C. S. Song, offer reflections on the experience of God's vulnerability to suffering. Moltmann argues that it is through the medium of "the crucified Christ" that God enters into the world of human suffering. Song affirms that God enters into humanity through his compassion, which is the pain of God. It is through Jesus' suffering and brokenness that God shares the mortality, frailty and vulnerability of humanity. Hence, the cross becomes the paradigm of loving solidarity with the humanity.

The most important point that Paul makes here in I Corinthians is that God has made the crucified Christ “our wisdom.”²¹ By presenting the crucified Christ, Paul offers what may be called “counter-order wisdom”, which seeks to counter destructive ideas and thwart theological eliticism, individualism, and hubris. This wisdom also identifies with the humble and lifts the lowly.²² Hence, for Paul, the cross is the wisdom of God. T. A. Harvey vividly makes this observation:

*The cross becomes a hermeneutical tool which deconstructs and re-describes the carnal discourses of humankind by inversion and exposure; thus revealing their true nature. In Christ the values of the fallen world are overthrown as humankind is dethroned, and the new order of the cross is established.*²³

The cross lends a hermeneutic of reversal, thereby countering pseudo power structures and elite culture. In the cross of Christ, God comes to express his loving solidarity with the have-nots, the weak and the wounded psyche. The slain Lamb thus provides the occasion for the different communities to converge together in affirming the unity of the humanity and multi-ethnic identities.

Lesslie Newbigin observes:

*[at the heart of the gospel] is the denial of all imperialisms, for at its center there is the cross where all imperialisms are humbled and we are invited to find the center of human unity in the One who was made nothing so that all might be one. The very heart of the biblical vision for the unity of humankind is that its center is not an imperial power but the slain Lamb.*²⁴

Life with others through integration and participation

At the table, the life of Christ is released through the partaking of the loaf and the cup. By taking part in the act of eating one loaf and partaking in one cup we embrace the life of Jesus replete with love, forgiveness and peace. The remembrance motif in the Lord’s Supper “Do this remembrance of me” invites us to see the

life of sharing expressed in the form of *koinonia* in the context of meal (I Cor 10:16). For S. D. Curie, the effect of the Eucharist is not to become partakers or partners of Christ but to obtain fellowship with the brethren.²⁵ It is clear that for Paul, the Eucharist cup and bread forms fellowship with the person of Christ. Paul develops his thought further by saying that this *koinonia* with Christ produces a new *koinonia* among those who share in the cup and bread.²⁶

Although the remembrance motif in 11:26 has both divine and human dimensions, Paul’s great concern here is to remind the Corinthians of the human-directed implications of this remembrance.²⁷ This means that the remembrance of Jesus’ death embodies the sharing of life with others. Hence the Lord’s Supper is neither simply a memorial of the last supper, nor of Christ’s death per se. For Paul, the concern is not merely personal or introspective. Gordon Fee observes: “We ourselves rather miss this point if we think of the table only in terms of our needs and not also in terms of those of others.”²⁸ This experience of other-mindedness instilled in us at the table helps us identify with others. S. C. Barton remarks:

*...according to Paul, the lordship of Christ is meaningless unless the marks of that lordship are borne in the individual bodies of believers and in the corporate body of those – women and men, ‘strong and weak’ – who claim to be themselves the body of Christ.*²⁹

For this reason, Paul’s advice to “wait for one another” in v.33 suggests that they welcome one another. It implies that all should partake together with no distinction in rank or amount or quality of food.³⁰ Herein, Paul’s exhortation to “wait for one another” implies hospitality.

Enhancing social space through the network of hospitality

The phrase, “wait for one another” in v.33 can often have a sense of welcoming in the context of a meal.³¹ In this context, the

community ought to wait for the poor, the have-nots, the weak and the stranger to take part in the meal. Thus, the table of the Lord serves to counter the privileged status of being an “insider”. Any claim on privileged status becomes incompatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ shared at the meal. In fact, the gospel of Christ offers greater resistance to validation that identifies one group as the privileged insiders and ostracises the others as outsiders. Hospitality thus entails the extension of love to strangers; it offers resistance to the forces of alienation and strangeness. In fact, one cannot remain in a state of strangeness when he or she enters into the Lord’s table of fellowship which shares the life of Christ.

B. Witherington III avers:

The Christians are called to be strangers in the world aware of our own essential otherness so that fear of strangers gives way to divinely enabled philoxenia (the love of stranger). Therefore, distinctions of “weak” and “strong” disappear in the face of love and hospitality.³²

This view raises the point that xenophobia and a fear of difference can dissipate in the context of love filled hospitality. Christian hospitality in its potentiality creates a space for the other to be in community. In this move to extend hospitality to all people, the cross of Jesus becomes the paradigm of hospitality. It is on the cross that Jesus creates a context wherein the Roman soldiers are invited to involve themselves in an act of extending hospitality. It is in the context of increasing hostility, violence, exhaustion and vulnerability that Jesus cries for water, “I am thirsty” (John 19:25). By expressing his thirst for water, Jesus challenges the Roman soldiers to extend hospitality by mitigating pain and hostility.

It is important to note that it is through the extension of hospitality that both the host and the strangers are brought into a network of relationship. A host of New Testament scholars such as Malina³³, P. Palmer³⁴ and Witherington³⁵ envisage the possibility of enhancing one’s social space in the context

of hospitality. When our social space is enlarged by hospitality, we can then shed off our divisions and aloofness can dissipate. This allows us to see the differences of other religious traditions as complementary. Hence, there is an imperative for us to create a network of hospitality through which we can cross our own boundaries into other religious traditions.

One Body and Many Members: A Theology of Belonging

Having noted the potential for hospitality at the Lord’s table, I would again invite you to reflect on Paul’s notion of one body and many members. Paul uses the redemption of the body in I Cor. 6 to illustrate the transfer of ownership from one’s self (body) to God (the temple of God). Paul uses the metaphor of slavery³⁶ to explain this transition (6:18-19). This transformed relationship, Paul asserts, has been affected by the redemption of the body. This redemption has established a permanent relationship marked by permanent possession and union (vv.13-14). The body thus becomes the possession of the Lord. Verse 14 reiterates this point that the “body is for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body.” What Paul accentuates here is the transition and redemption of the body from human use to divine use.³⁷ This sense of belonging derives from God, which is significant because of what Paul says in Acts 17: “In him we live and move and have our being; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.” Having found our common ground in God, I would like to outline three lessons from the discourse on the body for reflection.

Dialectic between the one and many as belonging to each other

In vv.22-24 of chapter 12, Paul speaks of the lesser parts of the body to make his point (v.23) that difference or division in the body are to be avoided by acknowledging the multiple interdependent parts. It is significant to note that Paul uses the metaphor “one body and many members”

to teach about the members' proper relationship with the body. He thus uses the analogy of the body to illustrate the relation of the one and the many. Commenting on this aspect, Witherington observes: "it is not merely an analogy, but a real supernatural entity, that is, Christ's people bound to him and to each other by God's spirit."³⁸ This explains the point that unity is divinely derived and related; it has both horizontal and vertical dimensions. Such unity in the body of Christ has wider relation between the individual body and the corporate body. Therefore, the dialectic between the one and the many brings in a new consciousness that gives the individual and the collective an identity. This change, for A. Atkins, epitomizes "a high group consciousness." He writes:

*Human destiny must be established by the right dialectic between the one and the many, between identity as an individual and identity as a group. In order for the group to work or have substance there must be a collection of individuals who give some of their identity and independence explicitly and or implicitly to the group.*³⁹

Relationality as belonging to the religious other

In close connexion with the body, Paul also used the concept of *Imago Dei* in Col. 1:15. This image invokes us to go back the creation story recorded in Gen. 1:26-27: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." The basic truth is that God made all people in his image. In order to understand the truth in this, it is important to look at the word "image" or *eikon*. Kleinknecht comments: "Thus *eikon* does not imply a weakening or a feeble copy of something. It implies the illumination of its inner core and essence."⁴⁰ It suggests that humanity reflects the inner core and essence, which infuses into humanity an identity of equality, relationality, unity and spirituality. In particular, the unity of the human race could be seen in the concept of *Imago Dei* – the image of God.⁴¹ This image allows one to celebrate one's life in a

relationship of relationality. As Kathy Ehrensperger reiterates: "...relationality is the fundamental human condition."⁴² In addition, relationality is essentially viewed as good because "through it human beings can empower each other to develop fully their potential as the persons they are. The absence or destruction of relationships is evil because it necessarily implies the destruction of life."⁴³ The only way to find solidarity with other religious traditions is through our common relationality.

Spirituality as engaging with peoples' struggles

The final aspect that I attempt to see in relation to the body is spirituality. By one's union and connectivity to the body of Christ, the body becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit. Since Paul describes a supernatural entity: "Christ's people bound to him and to each other by God's Spirit,"⁴⁴ our spirits are enriched. The evidence of one's spirituality is seen in his/her relationship with others. In the Indian context, interreligious dialogue has made inroads into other religious worlds. Interreligious dialogue is used as the main approach to promote good will, friendship, peace and openness, thereby mitigating tensions among various religious communities. But, it has yet to embrace social engagement with the struggles of humanity. The best way to enter into the world of the religious other is through liberative praxis. Common problems various different religious communities confront include suffering, violence, poverty, conflict, the fragmentation of the meaning of life and the disintegration of values. In order to make interreligious dialogue more participatory, we should let our spirituality merge with and address the struggles of humanity.

Conclusion

Paul's discourse on the body offers a paradigm and model for us to promote multi-ethnic identity. The models that promote the unity of the human race

include unity in diversity or diversity in unity, solidarity of life with others and mutual belonging. I would like to reiterate the truth that God's revelation, as revealed in Christ, affirms the theology of equality, mutuality and universality. In order for these paradigms to become a reality, one is called to construct a network of hospitality. It is through this network of hospitality that we can journey with people of other faiths. Our journey with other faiths will lend a healing touch that will let our life be renewed afresh. This renewed life, I hope, will infuse dynamism into our lives to articulate the story of truth and reconciliation in a meaningful way.

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¹A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 4th Edition, trans. L. R. Stockholm (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1965), 406, 466.

²W. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University, 1983), 73.

³Meeks, *Urban Christians*, 191.

⁴Cited by Stephen C. Barton, "Historical Criticism and Social – Scientific Perspectives in New Testament Study" in Joel B. Green (ed.), *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1995), 79.

⁵D. Tidball, *An Introduction to the Sociology of the New Testament* (Exegeter: Paternoster Press, 1983), 68. Tidball observes: "The Roman Senate was placed at the top of hierarchy that comprised aristocratic families whose rights and social status were defined by heredity. Below the senate was the *Equestrian* order that comprised such people as army or navy commanders and procurators. In terms of rights and social status they were not on par with the Senators, but not so in terms of wealth. Then the council of *decurians* in the Roman provinces were responsible to Rome. Their status depended

more or less on the goodwill of their masters in Rome, which, of course, afforded the possibility of social mobility into the upper echelon. Below the councils were the magistrates, followed by the free plebs, then the freedmen, and at the lowest strata of the social scale were slaves."

⁶D. G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence: Interests and Ideology from I Corinthians to I Clement* (Edinburgh: T& T Clark, 1996), 65.

⁷Horell, *Social Ethos*, 65.

⁸Dionysius of Halicarnasses, *Ant. Rom.* 6:86; *Livy* 2:32. See Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on I and II Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), 254.

⁹D. B. Martin, "Tongues of Angels and Other Status Indicators" in *JAAAR* 59 (1991): 563-69.

¹⁰P. F. Esler, *The Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology* (Cambridge: University Press, 1987), 171-72. Esler depicts the status of the aristocrats: "The aristocracy, in common with the elites in virtually every other pre-industrial society, preferred to keep their property in the form of land. Although they normally resided in the cities, they owned country estates largely worked by slaves, the surplus from which allowed them to live a life of leisure and luxury in town [...] The elite regarded themselves as morally superior to the rest, an attitude which is nicely illustrated by the use of the word *boni* to refer to them during the late Republican period."

¹¹Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 254.

¹²James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), 550.

¹³Paul groups together gifts of instruction (wisdom and knowledge); gifts of supernatural power (miracles and healings); and inspired utterances (prophecy and tongues). See Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 257.

¹⁴Elizabeth S. Fiorenza, *Sharing Her World: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 117.

¹⁵Daniel K. Darko, *No Longer Living as the Gentiles: Differentiation and Shared Ethical Values in Ephesians 4:17-6:9* (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 113.

¹⁶G. Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), 145-74.

- ¹⁷ C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2nd Edition (London: A & C Black, 1971), 261.
- ¹⁸ J. H. Neyrey, "Body Language in I Corinthians" in *Semeia* 35 (1986), 124.
- ¹⁹ J. J. Meggid, *Paul, Poverty and Survival* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 191.
- ²⁰ Barton, "Historical Criticism and Social – Scientific Perspectives in New Testament Study", *op. cit.*, 84-85.
- ²¹ Witherington (*Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 116) observes how the calling of Jesus as "wisdom" was one of the most important developments in early Christological thinking since it enabled early Jewish Christians like Paul to think of a pre-existent and post-existent Christ. It allowed them to see Jesus as Christ and the fulfilment of all that was said about personified wisdom in OT passages such as Proverbs 8 and 24.
- ²² Witherington, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), ch.7.
- ²³ T. A. Harvey, "The Corinthian Christ: A Methodological Fusion of Horizons" in *TTJ* 29 (2004), 21.
- ²⁴ Cited in Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 185. See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 159.
- ²⁵ S. D. Currie, *Koinonia in Christian Literature to 200 A.D.* (Emory: Emory University, 1962), 35.
- ²⁶ G. Panikulam, *Koinonia in the New Testament: A Dynamic Expression of Christian Life* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1979), 29.
- ²⁷ Fee, *I Corinthians*, 553.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 558.
- ²⁹ Barton, *Historical Criticism*, 85.
- ³⁰ Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 252.
- ³¹ 3 *Maccabees* 5:26; Josephus, *Antiquities* 7:351.
- ³² Witherington, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 349.
- ³³ B. J. Malina, "The Received and What it Cannot Do: III John and Hospitality" in *Semeia* 35 (1986), 73- 94.
- ³⁴ P. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (New York: Crossroads, 1981), 65. Palmer comments:

"Hospitality means inviting the stranger into our private space, whether that be the space of our home or the space of our home or the space of our personal awareness and concern. And when we do so, some important transformations occur. Our private space is suddenly enlarged; no longer tight and cramped and restricted, but open and expansive and free. [...] And our space may also be illumined. ... Hospitality to the stranger gives us a chance to see our own lives afresh, through different eyes."

³⁵ Witherington, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 349. See also H. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1975), 47. He observes: "When hostility is converted into hospitality then fearful strangers ... become guests revealing to their hosts the promise they are carrying with them. Then, in fact, the distinction between host and guest proves to be artificial and evaporates in the recognition of the new found unity. Thus the biblical stories help us to realize not just that hospitality is an important virtue, but even more that in the context of hospitality guest and host can reveal their most precious gifts and bring new life to each other."

³⁶ Slavery is used to depict salvation (I Cor. 6:19), servanthood (Phil. 2:6), and leadership (I Cor. 9:19).

³⁷ Minear, "Christ and the Congregation", 347-49.

³⁸ Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 254-55.

³⁹ A. Atkins, *Egalitarian Community: Ethnography and Exegesis* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1991), 70.

⁴⁰ H. Kleinknecht, "Eikon" in *TDNT* Vol.2, 389.

⁴¹ It is interesting to note a plethora of references, from Mal. 2:15, Rom. 3:23 and 5:12, Eph. 4:16, and Acts 17:25 which all affirm the unity of the human race.

⁴² Kathy Ehrensperger, *That We May be Mutually Encouraged: Feminism and the New Perspective in Pauline Studies* (New York/London: T & T Clark, 2004), 117.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 255.

Reading Ruth Interreligiously

Clare Amos

Introduction

I hadn't remembered until I was preparing to write this article – which is a distillation of a Bible study I gave at the Interdisciplinary Theological Colloquium on Hybridity, Hospitality and Multiple Religious Belonging in Chennai in October 2014 – that I could genuinely say that Ruth was the first biblical book which I read interreligiously. It was back in 1970 and between leaving school and beginning university, when I was spending three months in Israel learning Hebrew in preparation for my studies in theology which were due to start in October of that year. I was studying (and living) at an Ulpan – an institution unique to Israel where new immigrants came to learn modern Hebrew. There were also a few individuals like me who had other reasons for wanting to learn the language. Most of the students were Jewish, but there was a sprinkling of Christians such as myself. Ulpan Akiva – the particular place where I studied – had an excellent reputation for its welcoming and open spirit. At the end of the three-month course there was an informal graduation social evening at which each of the students was encouraged to offer a speech or reflection. I decided to re-tell the story of the book of Ruth – as I was one of the few “Gentiles” in that predominantly Jewish context I felt a sense of identification with her story, even though of course interreligious marriage has not been part of my own history. I was quite nervous as I retold the tale – just 18 (and possibly the youngest person in the room) I had not had much experience of teaching or public speaking. But it went well and was appreciated – even the twist in the tale from a Christian perspective that I felt important also to share; namely, the way that the genealogy at the end of the book is reflected also in Matthew's genealogy of Christ, and that Ruth appears as one of his four dubious

foremothers referred to directly in the genealogy.

When I led the Bible study in Chennai my methodology was to offer a close reading of the text of Ruth from beginning to end, though pressure of time meant that I focused more on the earlier chapters rather than the later ones. Originally I had thought of reproducing that methodology in this article, but perhaps the nature of the written word encourages me instead to reflect more generally on aspects and principles linked to an interreligious reading of the book, particularly bearing in mind the issue of “hybridity”, but as far as possible, also offering examples drawn from the text – most of which I referred to when I spoke in Chennai.

1. The historical context of Ruth
2. The canonical context of Ruth
3. “Close reading” – dialogue, names, binary polarities
4. Intertextuality
5. The humane spirit
6. Feminism, women and Ruth.
7. Historicity, wisdom, Moabite stone.
8. Conclusion

The Historical Context of Ruth

When I first studied the Book of Ruth at school as part of our scripture classes, the “accepted” understanding was that the book was written in Judah in the post-exilic Persian period as a protest against the exclusive religious spirit of the times. It was a tract designed to challenge the legislation linked to the figures of Ezra and Nehemiah which prohibited intermarriage with foreign women; this extended even to the sending away of those foreign wives to whom Israelite/Judaeen men were already married. Moabite women are specifically mentioned. (Ezra 9:1-10:44; Nehemiah 13:23-27). Additionally, Nehemiah 13:1-3 refers specifically to the prohibition of the Moabites (and the Ammonites) from ever

“enter[ing] the assembly of God”, presumably drawing on the legislation set out in Deuteronomy 23. It is thus understood that Ruth was written to provide an alternative counter-viewpoint to the “hardline” attitudes of the circles associated with Ezra and Nehemiah, with an apparently positive appreciation of at least one Moabite woman. Ruth’s own generosity elicits a responsive openness towards her in the biblical text. The culmination of the Book of Ruth – the book closes with the implicit assertion that Ruth is the great grandmother of King David – reinforces the message that Ruth has a major place in Israel’s story, in spite of being a Moabitess.

While not denying that this may well have been the historical and religious context for the writing of the Book of Ruth, there is much more to the book than this. So we first need to look at Ruth from a variety of other angles before returning to the basic question: what might the Book of Ruth say to us about multiple religious belonging?

The Canonical Context of Ruth

The canonical context of Ruth offers some suggestive pointers as to how we might read the book. It is situated differently in the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint. (English language translations normally follow the order of the Septuagint). In the Hebrew Bible, the book falls among the third section of scripture – the Writings (*Kethubim*) – itself a likely indication of the comparatively late period when it was constructed. In the earliest manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible it followed immediately on from the Book of Proverbs, which of course itself concludes with the picture of the ideal wife (Proverbs 31:10-31). Ruth, therefore, can be seen as personifying the ideal wife which Proverbs extolls. In some ways, however, the canonical position offered to Ruth in the Septuagint offers an even more interesting nuance. For the book of Ruth is here situated between Judges and I Samuel. Part of the reason for this is of course the apparent period in which the story of Ruth is set: “In the days when the judges ruled” (Ruth 1:1). But whether deliberately or

accidentally, the book seems to be set up as a direct contrast to the lawlessness with which Judges concludes, “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25). The final three chapters of Judges specifically exemplify this lawlessness in terms of the brutality of the relationships between men and women. Beginning with Judges 19, we hear of the rape and murder of a “Levite’s concubine” and its consequences which lead almost to the extermination of the tribe of Benjamin, a fate prevented only by the later capture in battle of women from Jabesh-Gilead and then the abduction of young women from Shiloh. Ruth, by contrast, gives us a picture of two women taking the initiative in a world dominated by men, and a community whose actions seem to be dominated by kindness (*hesed*) rather than abusive behaviour. The connection/contrast between Ruth and what has preceded it is further reinforced by the note about the provenance of the Levite’s concubine, “from Bethlehem of Judah” (Judges 19:1), the same town in which the activity of the Book of Ruth is set. It seems to me that the result of the probably deliberate positioning of Judges and Ruth next to each other in the Septuagint is a challenge which is offered to the readers along the following lines: “Ruth and Judges offer us two different models for the interrelationship of men and women – the way of kindness and mutual responsibility, leading to the honouring of both men and women and to life, or the way of violence and abusive relationships, leading to destruction and death: choose which way you will walk!” The choice is ours. Given that the narrative of Judges 19-21 also touches upon the issue of the relationship between Israelites and “foreigners” (e.g. Judges 19:12), and the expectations which can be made of both – which the narrative then proceeds to confound – this challenge “which way shall we walk” may also be relevant to the issue of multiple religious belonging or hybridity.

Binary Polarities in Ruth

Modern literary criticism of the Bible, influenced by structuralist theory, pays particular attention to what are called “binary polarities” in a narrative. It is through the setting up of these polarities and their eventual resolution that good stories are constructed. The Book of Ruth is an excellent example of this. It is replete with a whole range of polarities: death/life; famine/plenty; poverty/wealth; sterility/fertility; female/male; full/empty; bitter/sweet; old/young; alien land/homeland; and action of God/action of human beings. Such binary polarities in literature are reflections of what are often seen as the deep binary structures of human life. It is interesting to reflect that the action of multiple religious belonging can be seen as transgressing traditional polarities. Does Ruth, in resolving its own polarities in what seems to be a satisfactory way, then offer us wisdom we can draw on in relation to this wider question?

The Humane Spirit of Ruth

One of the interesting features of Ruth is how little direct action there is in the story on the part of YHWH (the LORD). YHWH acts once near the beginning of the story when we are told that “the LORD had had consideration for his people and given them food” (1:6), and once near its end as we read, “the LORD made her conceive and she [Ruth] bore a son” (4:13). Although the word YHWH appears at other points within the story, it is only in the context of human speech – generally in the form of a blessing or wider invocation. The two instances of YHWH’s direct action seem to act as a frame for the story, and they implicitly assert YHWH’s ultimate control over human life and history. Yet within this underlying frame, human beings themselves have a vital part to play in ensuring their own prosperity and that of their fellow human beings. They do so through their interaction with one another in kindness and generosity. It has been noticed that Ruth is the Old Testament book which has the highest percentage of dialogue: 55% of the book is direct speech

and conversation. It is through such speech that the action of the book is carried forward. This is a significant aspect of the story, and it reinforces the feeling of humanity’s importance in ensuring well-being for all. God works in Ruth not necessarily directly, but via his human agents behaving in a way that the wider world recognizes as human and humane. One perhaps amusing – yet vitally important – instance of this comes in the interaction of Ruth and Boaz. In 2:12, after meeting Ruth in the field, Boaz speaks perhaps over-proudly to Ruth as he prays for a divine blessing on her, “May the LORD reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the LORD the God of Israel, under whose wings [*kanaph*] you have come for refuge!” The word *kanaph* reappears in the next chapter in the mouth of Ruth herself, during her night-time meeting with Boaz as she asks him to “Spread your cloak [*kanaph*] over your servant for you are next-of-kin” (3:9). In what seems like a deliberate echo of Boaz’s earlier words back to him, Ruth is telling him fairly firmly, “Not so much of this piety claptrap in which you ask God to bless me, rather it is you yourself Boaz who needs to act so that that you are the direct agent of God’s blessing for me.”

It is also interesting to notice the use of the word *besed* in the story to describe the dealings of Ruth herself. This word, which is often used in scripture to describe God’s actions towards humanity, and particularly towards Israel, is now transferred to refer to the quality of human interaction – and as a result is weighted with spiritual meaning.

Word Play in Ruth

As suggested in the discussion of *kanaph* above, word play is an important part of this story. Several examples are linked to the names of the characters in the tale, and the meaning of their names. That is made clear by the overt remark made by Naomi on her return to Bethlehem: “Call me no longer Naomi [my sweet one], call me Mara [bitter], for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me” (1:20). The names of the two sons of Naomi, Mahlon and Chilion, are

probably intended to be suggestive of their fate, for they mean respectively “Wasting” and “Pining”. Boaz, on the other hand, is likely to be a much better and long-term bet, as his name means “with strength”. Given this play, it is interesting to reflect on Ruth’s own name: though not completely clear, it seems to mean something like “Beloved” or “Friend”. High praise indeed and suggestive of the storyteller’s viewpoint.

Although not exactly word play, the repeated use, particularly in chapter 1, of the Hebrew root *shuv* (variously translated as either “return” or “go back”) is significant and helps to reinforce Ruth’s role. By the end of chapter 1 the verb is used of Ruth’s (as well as Naomi’s) “return” to Bethlehem – a town which of course we must assume she had never previously visited.

Intertextuality

One interesting feature of the book is the drawing on ideas, concepts, images and language from other parts of scripture. Sometimes these offer us a twist in the tale. The presumption is that Ruth was written at a comparatively late stage compared with other Old Testament writings (as is indeed likely to have been the case), and so the use of words *etc.*, resonant with other biblical books, is deliberate and gives us clues to the writer’s intent. One example of this is the use of the Hebrew verb *dabaq* (cling) in 1:14 to describe Ruth’s refusal to leave Naomi. Is *dabaq* (which is comparatively rare in Hebrew) deliberately employed here to remind us of the use of the same verb in Genesis 2:24 where it is used to describe how a man will cling to his wife? That this may be the case is made more likely by the use of the verb *ʿazab* (leave) only a verse or so later; this verb also appears in Genesis 2:24 in conjunction with *dabaq*. In Genesis, we are told that a man will “leave” his parents to “cling” to his wife. Here, by contrast, Ruth refuses to “leave” her mother-in-law (and in the process might be moved to give up the likely chance of a future husband in her home land of Moab) but instead “clings” to her. The first readers of Ruth would probably have been aware of

the challenges this posed to traditional understandings; it might also have implicitly challenged the cruel treatment being meted out to the “foreign wives”, which according to Ezra’s and Nehemiah’s legislation should be sent away.

The next likely example of subversive intertextuality in Ruth follows on very closely. For it is difficult to hear Ruth’s pledge “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God,” without recalling the classic statement made by God in the Exodus narratives, his covenantal pledge to the people of Israel: “I will be your God and you shall be my people” (see e.g. Exodus 6:7). It is daring of the biblical writer to let us hear these divine words echoed in the mouth of a Gentile woman. Somehow, by her use of these words, Ruth becomes part of the covenant community.

Yet at the same time, the normal presuppositions of the covenant are tweaked in a further example of intertextuality. After their meeting, Boaz says to Ruth, “All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before” (2:11). There seem to be echoes of the story of Abraham in these words, and a reminder of Genesis 12:1, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” But at the same time as we can hear this echo, we can also realize the difference. Abraham’s travels seem to come about in response to a direct divine call; Ruth’s, on the other hand, because of her fidelity and love for a vulnerable human person. Is the biblical writer perhaps trying to tell us that God’s call can indeed work through human loyalties and human needs?

The Female Perspective

As suggested in the above comments on the canonical placing of the Book of Ruth, it may be that this writing is intended to challenge – gently but radically – patriarchal models of society. It is interesting how the

story both begins and ends with a patriarchal framework. At the beginning of the story, the women named are seen as somehow the possession of their male relatives and dependent upon them, both grammatically as well as economically. At the end of the story, the closing genealogy offers a patriarchal look into the future. Yet within these patriarchal bookends the story is surprisingly subversive. Sometimes it is the choice of an expression, such as “mother’s house” (1:8), which is unusual – the expectation here would be “father’s house” – though it is easy to slip over it without realizing just how strange it is. There is also the remarkable description of Ruth’s relationship to Naomi as being “more to you than seven sons” (4:15). Sometimes it is the description of what seems to be a normal action, which one then realizes how abnormal it really is! This is the case with Boaz’s instruction to Ruth to “go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn” (2:9). It is easy to forget that normally young men did not draw water – that was the role of young women. So roles are somehow being reversed at this point in the story: something which is underlined by the inversion of the type scene which links strangers, the drawing of water, and eventual marriage (e.g. Genesis 24; 29; Exodus 2).

But perhaps the most surprising aspect of this role reversal is that way that Ruth, with Naomi’s encouragement, takes such a direct initiative in her night-time dealings with Boaz in chapter 3. This of course is further emphasized if “feet” (3:8) is a euphemism for genitals at the point in the story when Ruth uncovers Boaz’s feet. Such is not normal behaviour by a young woman in a patriarchal society!

It is interesting, too, that in the final chapter Ruth is compared to Tamar, whose story in Genesis 38 had resonances with hers – first in its link to the custom of the Levirate marriage, then in her alien status (Tamar is described as the daughter of a Canaanite) and finally in the initiative she herself takes to deal with her intolerable situation.

What, if any, is the interrelationship between the challenge to patriarchy provided by the Book of Ruth, and questions of religious hybridity?

The Moabite Stone

Before we come to a conclusion to the overall question tackled in this article, it is interesting to divert our attention briefly to take a look at another text in which Moabites feature. This, however, is not a biblical text, but rather the extra-biblical Moabite Stone (also known as the Mesha Stele), which was discovered at Dibon in Transjordan (i.e. the ancient territory of Moab) in 1868. It apparently dates from the 9th century BCE and recounts a war between the Israelites and the Moabites in the time of King Mesha of Moab, also described in 2 Kings 3:4-27. But whereas 2 Kings tells the story from an Israelite point of view, the Moabite Stone tells it from a Moabite viewpoint. What is interesting however is that – with one major difference – the same theological framework is used by the Moabite Stone as is employed in the historical books of the Old Testament, such as 2 Kings. The failure and eventual success of the Moabites in their conflict with the Israelites is ascribed to the anger and then the appeasement of the deity – just as is the case in many Old Testament historical and prophetic passages. The only difference is that the deity taking these actions is Chemosh, the god of the Moabites, rather than YHWH, the god of the Israelites. (The name YHWH appears once in the Moabite Stone, linked to an altar which is plundered by the Moabites.) But other than this, the theology of the Moabite Stone is virtually identical to the theological framework offered by the pre-exilic biblical material. One important consequence of the Moabite Stone is that it makes it impossible to argue, as was done in some previous generations of Old Testament scholarship, that the concept of a god acting in history was unique to Israel. The Moabite Stone clearly proves that it wasn’t. In essence, the only difference it offers is to suggest that it was a different god acting in history, acting for a different people. The question of which, if either, the

Israelites or Moabites were correct about their assertions is of course also a different one. But the theological mirror image offered by the Moabite Stone of a people hostile to Israel, just as the Israelites were hostile to them, and the link between religious observance and division and conflict between peoples and nations, is an intriguing resource that should not be ignored.

Ruth and Religious Hybridity

In spite of the fact that Ruth is a biblical book which is frequently drawn on by both Jews and Christians in discussions of religious openness to “the other”, it is arguable that the book and its central character, Ruth, is not in fact a good model for hybridity or multiple religious belonging. After all, Ruth, as she journeys with Naomi away from her homeland of Moab, seems to turn her back on her own religious traditions with her pledge, “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” She is perhaps a model of a convert – or in Jewish tradition a proselyte – rather than a multiple religious believer. Yet there are, I believe, a number of aspects of the Book of Ruth which illuminate this theme – even if in a more tangential way.

First, I think Ruth highlights in a significant way the interplay between religion and race. Within the Christian tradition, the theological orthodoxy is that religion can be totally separated from race, for after all, is not our citizenship in heaven? Yet in reality, this is not so simple or stark – and certainly in a number of other religions there is indeed some sort of correlation between racial/ethnic identity and religious identity. It is perhaps especially in such religious contexts (e.g. India) that the issue of multiple religious belonging seems to come to the fore.

Secondly, the question of marriage – which is a primary focus for the Book of Ruth – is also a situation in which the issue of religious hybridity comes to the fore. Many examples of people who claim to be

multiple religious believers are found among individuals who have entered into marriage with a person of another faith tradition. Is there some wisdom that Ruth can offer about how the belonging that belongs to marriage and that which belongs to faith can be interwoven constructively and for the flourishing of humanity?

This may be linked to the question about patriarchy which I posed above. Given the patriarchal bias of most religious traditions (not simply the Abrahamic faiths), what can learn from Ruth’s gentle subversion of patriarchal structures and modes of being? And what can we learn about the ability of women to slip under the radar of, and confuse (in a positive way!) the harsh lines of demarcation sometimes presented by religious difference?

Perhaps, however, what is most significant about the Book of Ruth as a resource for issues relating to multiple religious belonging is the sheer humanity of the book. Is it significant that the biblical concept of salvation history, of God acting in history, is not prominent in this book, and that even incidents of the salvation history tradition such as the call of Abraham are subverted intertextually by Ruth’s insistence on the primacy of human loyalty, that so much of the book is composed of dialogue and conversation between human beings? I believe so. Without offering us even direct pointers Ruth can rather suggestively indicate the spirit in which discussions about religious hybridity need to take place in our world today, even in spite of the gulf of time and space which separates us from that of Ruth.

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Practicing Multiple Religious Belonging for Liberation: A Reflection from a Dalit Perspective

Joshua Samuel

Introduction

As much as the validity of religion as a categorization of human communities is questioned,¹ and doubtless a complex category it may be,² the power that the word “religion” has wielded over human history cannot be underrated. It is an undeniable fact that in recent times the gulf between religions has shrunk considerably, thanks to the advancements in science and technology.³ As a result, it has become an imperative necessity that religious communities *have to relate with one another* for the well-being of the whole world. Speaking as a Christian pastor and theologian, I am not surprised that interfaith dialogue has occupied a prominent space in ecclesial and ecumenical forums.⁴ However, rather than being mere “talking”, as comparative theologian John Thatamanil challenges us, interfaith dialogue should prod us toward interfaith learning.⁵ One cannot but agree with Wesley Ariarajah’s claim that in our religiously pluralistic world, we cannot live without our neighbours belonging to other religious traditions.⁶ Moreover, given the realities of violence and war between human communities – more often than not caused because of exclusive religious belief claims – Hans Kung’s oft-used cliché that there cannot be any peace in the world without peace amongst the religions of the world has to constantly ring in our ears.⁷

As we recognize the importance of interreligious dialogues and interreligious learning, there appears to be a new interreligious trend in practice; namely, “multiple religious belonging” which is especially prevalent in Western countries like the United States of America.⁸ As an Indian Christian, I noticed (initially to my shock before getting used to it) people who claim to be double or multiple believers, meaning that they want to enjoy the positive attributes of more than one religion. Why

should they stick to one religion given that no religion is perfect or good in itself? Why not use religions as complementary so that their lives can be enhanced by more than one faith?

While I do not have any serious problems with such multiple religious belonging, I believe that this is not the only way in which it is practiced. That is, expressions of multiple religious belonging cannot be restricted just to the conscious selection of religious traditions. It should be borne in mind that multiple religious belonging occurs both consciously and unconsciously. Moreover, multiple religious belonging also happens as a strategy of resilience and resistance in oppressive contexts. This last kind of multiple religious belonging is my major concern in this paper. In other words, I want to seek how multiple religious belonging has (in the past) and could (in the future) help marginalized and oppressed communities – subalterns⁹ – to cope with subjugation.

Bearing this in mind, I want to begin my essay by briefly mapping the different types of multiple religious belongings. Secondly, I want to argue why multiple religious belonging is important for the marginalized communities in India. In this and the final sections, I will focus on the Dalit¹⁰ communities in India. Finally, based on this argument, I will suggest how Indian Christianity and the Indian church could be re-envisioned through the lens of multiple religious belonging to realize the cause of Dalit liberation. Let me acknowledge here that much of my articulation in this paper is done from a theological perspective keeping the Christian Dalits in mind.

The Multiplicity of Multiple Religious Belonging

I believe that we can broadly categorize multiple religious belonging into two types. First, there is the multiple religious belonging that happens by choice. In this more well-known type, there is freedom for the individual to choose and chart out her faith in a new religious direction. A believer¹¹ in a particular religious tradition attempts to learn from and explicitly claims participation in another faith tradition. This choice of an integrated religious path could be the result of a deep intellectual and/or spiritual (soul) searching. For example, Paul Knitter, the well-known pluralist theologian of religion, claims that he is a better Christian by becoming a Buddhist. As a committed Catholic he asserts: “my core identity as a Christian has been profoundly influenced by my passing over to Buddhism” and “... the more I have discovered what it really means to be ‘in Christ Jesus’ the more I have felt the need and the ability to listen to and learn from the Buddha...”¹² The same opinion is echoed by John Thatamanil, who strongly supports the need for multiplicity of religiosity. Although he is reluctant to use the term belonging,¹³ he argues that

... there are good reasons to suppose religious knowledge can be deepened by multiplicity. MRP (multiple religious participation) can be understood as that process whereby persons and, in some cases, communities understand the nature of ultimate reality more capaciously precisely because practitioners encounter ultimate reality from multiple angles of vision.¹⁴

Thus, multiplicity becomes the means for delving deeper into theological questions that otherwise remain unanswered within one’s own tradition. Of course, this need not always result in an official initiation into a second religion, as in the case of Knitter.¹⁵ Thatamanil observes that there are those multiple religious participations that happen at a cultural level rather than religious, such as Christians practicing yoga or Jews engaging in Buddhist meditations where the Christian does not become a

Hindu or the Jew a Buddhist.¹⁶ It should also be noted that not all multiple religious belonging happens with metaphysical or existential questions in mind. It could also arise out of love between two individuals from different religious backgrounds resulting (in most cases) in an interreligious marriage. Nevertheless, here again the choices of religions are made for personal reasons.

However, as I have mentioned, not all multiple religious belonging happens to quench theological or philosophical thirst. Apart from the “opted” and “chosen” multiple religious belonging described above, they (multiple religious belongings) also happen quite naturally in religiously pluralistic cultures. That is, in such contexts there is a great interweaving of different religions within a given geographical space – so much so that these intersections are experienced and embodied by individuals and communities more often unconsciously. In this respect, Thatamanil explains that in such places

... historically deep and complex modes of communal hybridization are rarely matters of individual choice... Persons in community over the course of history have evolved complex patterns of religious multiplicity that have an integrity and wisdom that are community sustaining.¹⁷

Of course, this is a more positive approach to hybridization (or hybridity) that does not take into account the power dynamics that operate between communities. Therefore, I term Thatamanil’s proposition “horizontal religious hybridity”. But post-colonial scholars have long criticized this simple equation of hybridity with “cross-cultural ‘exchange’... since it usually implies negating and neglecting the imbalance and inequality of the power relations it references.”¹⁸ Frequently, if not always, hybridity occurs with deep-rooted power interests and objectives of sustenance. For Homi Bhaba, who is one of the main proponents of this concept, hybridity (which I prefer to call “vertical hybridity” in contrast to Thatamanil’s “horizontal hybridity”)

... lays emphasis on the survival even under the most potent oppression of the distinctive aspects of the culture of the oppressed, and shows how these become an integral part of the new formations which arise from the clash of cultures characteristic of imperialism.¹⁹

In other words, through hybridity the subjugated people at the bottom of the social pyramid creatively appropriate and use the religious and the cultural sources of the dominant (usually their oppressors) in order to sustain themselves through their oppressive situation. This is not to say that the marginalized communities are the only ones who use hybridity. In fact, more often than it is acknowledged, socially and politically dominant communities appropriate the cultural and religious values of subjugated people. It is along these lines that feminist theologian Kwok Pui-Lan warns that hybridity, when articulated and practiced carelessly, can become an arrogant intrusion into the lives of the colonized people.²⁰ Nevertheless, I believe that there cannot be any denying of the fact that for the subalterns, hybridity (such as multiple religious belonging) has a promising possibility of surviving and challenging forces of oppression. In sum, I simply want to emphasize that multiple religious belonging, when understood as vertical hybridity, becomes a critical tool for the liberation and emancipation of the subalterns in hierarchically structured societies.

Multiple Religious Belonging and Dalits

Having argued that hybridity plays a crucial role in hierarchical and colonial contexts, in this section I want to explore how relevant this concept might be for marginalized communities in India. My questions in this section are the following: Has multiple religious belonging ever been a part of Dalit history? Does it or can it make sense to them? Does multiple religious belonging hold any emancipatory possibilities for Dalits?²¹

We need to acknowledge how, unfortunately, pre-modern Dalit history is less spelled out and recorded as we might like it to be.²² However, when seen from a phenomenological perspective, I believe that multiple religious belonging could become an important tool for the Dalits to reconnect with their past. To begin with, we must remember that Dalit communities have had their own distinct worship, theology and metaphysics throughout history. Ostracized from main society as untouchables and outcastes, (whenever that originated in history)²³, they were pushed and forced to evolve their own religious practices. And scholars are strongly convinced that these religious faiths, no matter how illogical and irrational it might have appeared for the caste communities²⁴ and the European colonizers, must have been and indeed continue to be meaningful and empowering for the Dalits. Keeping the Dalits in mind, Felix Wilfred writes:

The subalterns who are oppressed and marginalized have always sought in their religious experience and symbols an important means to counter the domination they suffer. In fact, revolutionary and subversive elements are built into their tradition. At particular historical junctures, the energies for the liberation of the subalterns from the dominant religious tradition and its ideological legitimation of power and control are released and set in motion. The subaltern religion goes even further to challenge the cultural, social, political and economic structures.²⁵

Isn't this historical liberative aspect of Dalit religiosity to be reclaimed? Speaking from a Christian point of view, it is a well-known fact that scores of Dalits became Christians in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, it should be noted that with their Christianization, such Dalits had also evidently severed their ties with their own past. In other words, Dalits in their urge to free themselves from the oppressive shackles of "Hinduism", also cut their connection to their own religio-cultural roots.²⁶ I should point out here that I do not in any way undermine the importance of the conversion of Dalits to Christianity (and other religions like Buddhism).²⁷ But my

objective is to remind us that because of the complexities of modernism, colonialism and casteism, Christian Dalits were forced to accept a unitary notion of spiritual existence i.e. one cannot belong to more than one religion.²⁸

If the religious roots of the Dalits are taken seriously, we would be able to see that Dalit faith traditions, like many other subaltern religions, were and are extremely hybrid. Sathianathan Clarke, writing on the religion of a particular Dalit community – namely, the Paraiyar – reminds us that their religiosity is constructed in relation with (and from) the dominant caste communities, as mentioned in the previous section.²⁹ In other words, Dalits practiced multiple religious belonging, perhaps intentionally, by blending the religious resources of their oppressors to creatively form their own religion. Wilfred elucidates this point directly when he says

*... subaltern religiosity is made up of elements originating from the religious tradition of the dominant groups, castes and classes [...] In other words, the subalterns absorb the religious elements of the castes and classes dominating them. The most obvious example is the penetration of Brahmanical religious tradition into the Dalit and tribal religiosity.*³⁰

Wilfred goes on to call this kind of religious hybridity a “creative ambiguity” – a distinct feature of subaltern religions that facilitates resilience to survive and resistance to fight oppressive systems.³¹ Therefore, it is possible to conclude that Dalits were able to face and challenge oppression precisely because of their inability to be *limited in* and *fixated on* one particular religious or cultural system, but instead embraced and experienced plurality. In other words, multiplicity has been the strength of the Dalits!

Bearing these observations in mind, I see no reason why such religious hybridity should not be the case for Christian Dalits today. That is, rather than demanding Dalits who convert to Christianity to sever their ties with their community, why not be open to

the possibility of allowing them to enjoy the fruits of multiple religious belonging? After all, multiple religious belonging has been successful in keeping these communities alive for more than two thousand years, and long before liberative Christianity entered the Indian shores.³² Perhaps Christian Dalits have a lot to learn from their own history to help them appreciate multiple religious belonging.

Multiple Religious Belonging for Dalit Liberation: Some Reflective Proposals

In this final section, I want to argue for some possible ways by which multiple religious belonging can be encouraged by the church. But before this, I want to explain briefly why Indian Christianity can no longer claim to be the exclusive “saviour” of Dalits.

While Christianity has undoubtedly been very helpful to the Dalits for their liberation and has opened up new vistas and avenues of possibility, the church has also not been entirely innocent of caste. Even as Western missionaries tried to invite more people from the depressed classes (as Dalits were called in pre-independent India) into the Christian flock, they experienced serious pushback from the caste Christians. I am reminded of one of my earlier studies wherein I learnt how the protestant missionaries were “cornered” by the caste Christians to ensure that they wouldn’t have to renounce caste or untouchability. In some cases, missionaries were even threatened with re-conversions back to Hinduism, just for the sake of caste.³³ Of course, this did not stop the Dalits from joining Christianity. There were, for instance, some exceptional missionaries such as Adam Andrew who furthered the cause of the emancipation of the Dalits.³⁴ And there were several leaders within the Dalit communities themselves, like Ditt who carried on the missionary task of reaching out to the Dalits.³⁵ All this to say, contrary to the common and ignorant (and should I add, arrogant) belief that Dalits blindly followed the missionaries (in)to Christianity for the sake of material benefits, they did

choose their own religious path in Christianity.³⁶

In all, it is impossible to overlook the fact that caste has been an inherent part of Indian Christianity. Noticing and experiencing its brunt, Masilamani Azariah challenged caste in Indian Christianity as “the unchristian side of the Indian church.”³⁷ Though time has progressed and there has been significant change on several fronts, it appears that caste cannot be evicted from the Indian Church. Caste and untouchability, like many social evils, find their own way of morphing into newer forms for subtle and covert existence. In this regard, we cannot ignore the role of Dalit theology in not only critiquing the existence of caste within the church but also in trying to redeem the liberative values of Christianity. Dalit theology has emerged as a strong counter-theology that can radically challenge the apathy of the church in rooting out the caste system.³⁸ However, as scholars have noted recently, Dalit theology has been struggling to make itself relevant to the Dalit communities themselves, for whose liberation upon which it is grounded. Peniel Rajkumar observes that when we critically (re)view the practical efficacy of Dalit theology, it sadly seems to be wanting. Rajkumar points out that one of the many reasons for this is the silencing of the religio-cultural worldview of the Dalits and the denial of the reality of the “soft boundaries that exist between the Dalits and the non-Dalits.”³⁹

Self-righteous, Christian-centric attitudes of Dalit theologians that claim the gospel of Jesus Christ as the only means of liberation while simultaneously juxtaposing the Dalit religious values (now within Hinduism) as completely evil have had, I am afraid, reverse effects on the Christian Dalit communities by alienating them from the rest of the community. Sathianathan Clarke argues that Dalits “turning their backs completely on their own religion and culture which has sustained them through centuries, may in fact be a collective act of avoidance: an attempt to evade and dodge their own identity and selfhood. In a way it is a caving

in to the enticement of sanskritization.”⁴⁰ Along the same lines, Y. T. Vinayaraj asserts that “[C]hristian Dalits by losing their common history/memory became a memory/less/past less/history less people.”⁴¹ Therefore, I want to posit that Dalits who maintain their connections with their religious traditions should not be shunned or demonized, but rather celebrated and encouraged. Here I want to make two elucidations. First, though Dalits should be open to maintaining multiple religious belonging with religions of their choice, given my interpretation of multiple religious belonging as hybridity, I am more concerned about Dalits redeeming and enjoying the emancipatory values of their religious traditions (which is now a part of Hinduism). Secondly, it should be borne in mind that my focus in this paper is more on Dalits who are joining the Christian fold rather than those who are already Christians, although the latter can also be encouraged to engage in multiple religious belonging. Now, there might be some doubts among readers whether Dalits should be left where they are viz. in Hinduism. I do not adhere to this option for two reasons. First, given that my proposal is in favour of multiple religious belonging, just as Christian Dalits enjoy the fruits of their indigenous historical religiosity, so also should Hindu Dalits be allowed to receive the prophetic values of Christianity. In other words, I prefer Dalits to experience, in continuation of their hybridity, and draw from the deep treasures of both these traditions.⁴² Second, given the pressures of Hindu fundamentalism, Dalits still continue to see their conversion to Christianity as a means of escape from their plight and therefore I would opt that this avenue is not closed on their faces.⁴³ Keeping all of these challenges and observations in mind, I would posit three brief suggestions to Indian Christianity for encouraging multiple religious belonging as a means of liberation. I suggest that there needs to be a revised understanding of mission, church and liberation within the framework of multiple religious belonging.

Let me begin with “mission”. I think it is safe to assume that generally speaking,

mission is understood as the sharing of the good news of eternal life in Jesus Christ and through that sharing people are invited to join the church. Of course, all types of mission need not be aimed at or end in conversion, and I believe that several Indian churches may not adhere to such a limited understanding of mission any longer. But nevertheless, I believe that missionaries do take pride in “fishing” for human beings for salvation and aim toward baptism of the “new believers”. I do not want to make judgments about such notions of mission here. But having argued that multiple religious belonging could have positive implications for Dalit liberation, what I want to suggest is that mission be reconceived as solidarity with the Dalits rather than their conversion itself. In this schema, the gospel would be still shared and Dalits would (on their own accord) join the Christian faith. But rather than insisting on their “exclusive” membership in Christianity, would it be possible to accept them as members of the body of Christ, without laying down stipulations and conditions? In other words, could they be(come) multiple religious belongers? Would that be too unchristian?

I would strongly believe that such an understanding of mission would not be in opposition with Jesus’ mission itself. Let me give a short explanation. In the first place, it is important to remember, as I have mentioned several times in this paper, we cannot superimpose *our* conceptualization of religion onto the biblical world. Jesus was a Jew, but not a member of Judaism as a religion as we would think today.⁴⁴ This means what Jesus taught to his disciples and to his followers was not conversion to a new religion but transformation of their society. Hence, the prophetic words in the Nazareth manifesto:

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.*⁴⁵

I believe this means that the mission of the church in Jesus’ way has to be focused on social transformation more than recruiting members for the institutional(ized) church. Of course, I do not deny that mission also must address metaphysical questions of human beings. However, I only want to emphasize that nothing should disconnect the church from its primary task of building and becoming a community of solidarity with oppressed people. Therefore, in this way of doing mission, religious affiliation takes a backseat and the church prioritizes the emancipation of suffering people.

Such an understanding of mission challenges us to re-view our comprehension of the church as well. Church, as the *ekklesia* (the called-out community) is generally considered to be a closed community. It is believed to be a community based on memberships. It is taken to be a structured institution with leadership that wields power over its “members”. Generally, the insiders remain *in(side)* the church by adhering to certain beliefs while outsiders “enter” the church through baptism. When I say “closed” I do not mean that churches (in general) are opposed to people of other religious faiths joining them. On the contrary, I would say that churches are welcoming and (more often than not) always enthusiastic to embrace outsiders.

However, what I want to suggest is that churches may need to become more than just welcoming. I believe that the church would have to become “open” in the sense of becoming a “fenceless” community. That is, rather than inviting people to join a closed and walled in community, I propose that our churches may need to become a space without borders. In this borderless, fenceless church I see multiple religious belonging becoming a possibility and being useful for all, especially for communities like the Dalits. Why should not the Christian church, which claims to be committed to the liberation of Dalits, become an open community? Why cannot Dalits be allowed to stay on in their own religious traditions, even as they partake in Christianity? Is it not possible for us to break the modernist

hegemonies of religion by allowing people (in this the case, Dalits) to enjoy the fruits of more than one religion? I believe that the church that I have proposed here could be a move in this direction.⁴⁶

Thirdly, I believe that such a solidarity-oriented mission would also challenge us to envision broader and deeper meanings of liberation. That is, Dalit liberation must not and cannot be seen as an isolated event that stands apart from other communities. On the contrary, I believe that it should be understood in relation to other caste communities. Though Dalit discourse in general, and Dalit theology in particular, have struggled with identity-based liberation, in recent times, Dalit theologians have recognized the need to move beyond such essentializing identity politics. In a recent appraisal of Dalit theology it has been noted that

*We infer that Dalit theology has reached the limits of its preoccupation with identity politics. [...] Broken and crushed identities cannot be mobilized or healed by presuming and posturing of a fixed, essential, enduring, and a common Dalit identity... Rather, "Dalit" is projected as an open and dynamic affirmation of brokenness that invites solidarity from others who commit themselves to breaking down all forms of dehumanization based on the caste system.*⁴⁷

Along this line of thought, I also see the necessity of recognizing that Dalits cannot be separated from their relationship to Hinduism – therefore the church must work along with it. Because of the crisscrossing of the religious and the cultural, Dalits are related to Hinduism in one way or another. Note that in this paper I have not proposed a “binary structure of opposition” in regards to the Dalits and other caste communities, even though I always prioritize the liberation of Dalits.⁴⁸ Rather, the emphasis has always been on hybridity. It is in this sense that I believe Dalit liberation would have to be(come) a reconciliatory process. Though there are several loose ends to be tied in this journey, the Indian Church would have to accept the need to work with Hinduism (and Hindu theologians) to

achieve an egalitarian society. Therefore, the ultimate goal in the struggle for Dalit liberation is not *just* the liberation of Dalits over non-Dalits, but a reconciled society that is built on justice and peace.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to argue that multiple religious belonging holds several possibilities for Dalits. I first demarcated the different types of multiple religious belonging and then showed that multiple religious belonging has been a significant part of Dalit history. Given the fact that the hybrid Dalit religions have helped Dalits face the social oppression in their history, and that such multiple religiosity gives them a better way of reclaiming their past, there is no reason why Dalits should not opt for multiple religious affiliations. Moreover, speaking as a Christian, I believe that the church cannot force the Dalits to ignore the religious values of their ancestors. In that sense, I have suggested that Indian Christianity would have to re-envision its notions of

1. Mission as projects of solidarity formation
2. Church as an open, fenceless community of Christ and
3. Dalit liberation as the reconciliation of all people without compromising justice.

I hope that these reflections and suggestions would encourage us to reflect more deeply and also critically on the possibilities that multiple religious belonging offers us in a world that is affected by suffering, especially by unjust social structures. Perhaps the fostering of multiple religious identities would become a way for people of different religious traditions in a divided planet to caucus and conspire together as one community to dream, strive and (someday) realize a just and egalitarian world.

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¹ John Thatamanil, along with several other post-colonial critics, argues that religion as we understand it today to be an essentialized notion of life is in fact a politicized and hegemonic offshoot of modernity and colonialism. See John J. Thatamanil, “Comparative Theology after Religion” in Stephen D. Moore and Mayra Rivera (eds.), *Planetary Loves: Spivak, Postcoloniality and Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 238-257. For more on the “evolution” of religion as an essentialized modern category see Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013).

² I am reminded of the works of post-secular theorists such as Talal Asad who claim that the birth and growth of the two “Siamese twins” – religion and secularism – has greatly affected our lives at a global level. See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 45-46.

³ Kwok Pui-Lan, *Globalization, Gender and Peacebuilding* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2012), 5-8.

⁴ Douglas Pratt, *The Church and Other Faiths: the World Council of Churches, the Vatican, and Interreligious Dialogue* (Bern; New York: Peter Lang, 2010).

⁵ John J. Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine: God, Creation, and the Human Predicament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 3.

⁶ Wesley Ariarajah, *Not Without My Neighbour: Issues in Interfaith Relations* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999).

⁷ Cited from Alan Race, “Theology of Religions in Change: Factors in the Shape of a Debate” in Paul Hedges and Alan Race (eds.), *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 6.

⁸ For example, Hinduism is a favourite among Americans (without an Indian origin). David Briggs, “Hindu Americans: The surprising, Hidden Population Trends of Hinduism in the US.” *The Huffington Post Website*. Huffington Post. Web. 28 April 2011. Accessed on 12 November 2014.

⁹ Though I would use the terms “oppressed” and “marginalized” (along with “Dalit” when it

comes to the Indian context), I also want to use the term “subaltern” to indicate inclusiveness of all “those groups who are subject to the [hegemony] of the ruling classes” and those who are “denied access to ‘hegemonic’ power.” Cf. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, Third edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 244. (Bold in original text).

¹⁰ To put it briefly, Dalits are those communities of people who were formerly called “untouchables”. Though untouchability is abolished in India, it is still practiced rather widely. Dalit – coming from the Sanskrit word *Dal* meaning crushed or broken – is a name that the Dalits chose for themselves to fight against caste-based oppression. For more on this, see Shrirama, “Untouchability and Stratification in Indian Civilization” and John C. B. Webster, “Who is a Dalit?” in S. M. Michael (ed.), *Dalits in Modern India: Visions and Values* (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1999), 39-79.

¹¹ Note that I use the term “believer” to designate those who believe and practice the teachings of a particular faith tradition.

¹² Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2011), 215-216.

¹³ For Thatamanil, “Belonging is problematic because membership, especially if understood as a matter of exclusivity, is inapplicable to a number of traditions”, such as Hinduism or Confucianism. John J. Thatamanil, “Eucharist Upstairs, Yoga Downstairs: On Multiple Religious Participation”, 4. Paper presented at the International Doctoral Seminar at the University of Kwazulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

¹⁴ John J. Thatamanil, “Eucharist Upstairs, Yoga Downstairs”, 13.

¹⁵ Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha*, 216.

¹⁶ John J. Thatamanil, “Eucharist Upstairs, Yoga Downstairs”, 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁸ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts, op. cit.*, 136.

¹⁹ Cited by Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India* (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1998), 127.

²⁰ Kwok Pui-Lan, *Globalization, Gender and Peacebuilding, op. cit.*, 61-64.

²¹ Let me acknowledge here that though there might be several ways of addressing the positive contributions of multiple religious belonging, I am taking more of a historical and empirical approach. In other words, I propose (without

denying the other possible and perhaps more stronger approaches) that if multiple religious belonging worked/s for Dalits, there is no reason why Indian Christianity (at least those forms and traditions which are concerned about Dalit liberation) should also encourage it.

²² However, I acknowledge that there have been several attempts to draw out the history of Dalit communities as the original inhabitants of the Indian sub-continent. See James Massey, *Roots of Dalit History, Christianity, Theology and Spirituality* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1996), 11-20, 47-53. Also see, Romila Thapar, *Cultural Pasts* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 235-237.

²³ I say this only to remind ourselves that it is difficult to construct a linear account of Dalit history and thereby spot the origins of untouchability. Dalits are not one group of people but a community of scattered communities along the length and breadth of the subcontinent, but (interestingly) experiencing almost the same kinds of ostracization and stigmatization but in different forms.

²⁴ I use the term “caste-communities” rather than “upper-caste” to again remind us that “Dalit” is not a caste and Dalits are in fact a “casteless” people.

²⁵ Felix Wilfred, *The Sling of Utopia* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2005), 147.

²⁶ This is primarily due to the problem of the modernist understanding of “religion” and the misconception of Hinduism as a religion. To put it simply, European colonizers (as they did everywhere) constructed a religion called Hinduism (like all the other “isms” they created) sweeping most of the similar looking traditions together. In a sense, Kancha Ilaiah is right when he argues that he and other Dalitbahujans were never Hindus. Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I am not a Hindu? A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (Calcutta: Samya, 1996). Also, on how Hinduism was constructed as a vedanta-centred, Western-compatible religion see Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and the Mystic East* (London: Routledge, 1999), 96-117.

²⁷ On a personal note, I can never vouch enough for the importance of the conversions of Dalits to Christianity. My own grandparents became Christians having been touched by the love and warmth of the Christian missionaries and the church. And, I do not in anyway negate the clarion call given to the Dalits by Dr B. R. Ambedkar to completely ignore Hinduism. But it is important to remember that I am

approaching Hinduism as a Western construct that was strategically used by the upper caste elites. See note 27.

²⁸ Mark C. Taylor asserts that this obsession of the “I” or self as “unique and unified” in opposition to the other i.e. one cannot have multiple identities, is strongly founded on Western monotheism. Hence we find the problem of the Western rational mind in accepting the embodiment of plurality in individuals and communities. Cited by John J. Thatamanil, “Managing Multiple Religious and Scholarly Identities: An Argument for a Theological Study of Hinduism” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68/4 (December 2000), 796.

²⁹ Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 127.

³⁰ Felix Wilfred, *The Sling of Utopia*, 145.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

³² Two clarifications are in place here: First, I am not speaking of the St. Thomas Christian tradition in India here, which in spite of (presumably) arriving in India in the first century had not opened itself to the Dalits and other lower castes for a very long time. Second, by proposing the reclamation of Dalit religious history I do not seek to romanticize some glorious past. What I am interested to do is to show that multiple religious belonging can be helpful for Dalits who many times have to face the reality of untouchability and caste-based oppression in their lives.

³³ Joshua Samuel, “SIUC and Caste” in Benjamin Inbaraj (ed.), *South India United Church (SIUC), 1908-2008: Centenary Reflections: Centenary of Church Union in South India* (Chennai: CSI Diocese of Madras, 2008), 156-175.

³⁴ P. Dayanandan, “Dalit Christians of Chengalpattu Area and the Church of Scotland” in George Oommen and John C. B. Webster (eds.), *Local Dalit Christian History* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), 18-64.

³⁵ James Massey, *Dalits in India: Religion as a Source of Bondage or Liberation with Special Reference to Christians* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), 95-103.

³⁶ This continues to be the general opinion. Apparently, it was also the view of none other than the great champion of non-violence, Gandhi, who believed that Dalits did not have the ability or the agency to change or choose their faith.

³⁷ M. Azariah, “The Unchristian Side of the Indian Church” in *The South India Churchman* (1983).

³⁸ One of the (if not *the*) pioneering voices of Dalit theology was that of Prof. Arvind P. Nirmal. See “Toward a Dalit Theology” in Arvind P. Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute), 53-70.

³⁹ Peniel Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Prospects and Possibilities* (Surrey, Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 170.

⁴⁰ Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 46.

⁴¹ Y. T. Vinayaraj, *Re-Visiting the Other: Discourses on Postmodern Theology* (Tiruvalla: Christava Sahitya Samithi, 2010), 72.

⁴² Here I am inspired by Aloysius Pieris who suggests that both Buddhism and Christianity can complement and critique one another in our struggles for liberation. See Aloysius Pieris, S. J. “The Buddha and the Christ: Mediators of Liberation” in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a*

Pluralistic Theology of Religions (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), 162-177.

⁴³ Peniel Rajkumar, “Re-Cast(e)ing Conversion, Re-visiting Dialogue: Indian Attempts at an Interfaith Theology of Wholeness” in *JASR* 26.2 (2013), 157-171.

⁴⁴ Neither was Paul! “Religion” as we use it today was not part of the pre-modern world’s vocabulary. See Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 11. Also see note 1.

⁴⁵ Luke 4: 18-19. New International Version.

⁴⁶ I am well aware that this proposal needs a stronger and more elaborate defense. Given the limits of this paper, I intend to develop my arguments in a subsequent work.

⁴⁷ “Introduction” in Sathianathan Clarke, Deenabandhu Manchala and Philip Vinod Peacock, *Dalit Theology*, 12-13.

⁴⁸ Peniel Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology*, 170.

Marga-Darshan: Horizons and Hopes for Christians and Hindus to Walk the Talk of Justice and Peace Today

Message from the Hindu-Christian Dialogue held in Dhulikhel, Nepal
8-12 October 2014

We, a group of 30 men and women from Bangladesh, Nepal and India came together for Marga-Darshan, a Hindu-Christian consultation exploring the theme “Horizons and Hopes for Hindus and Christians to Walk the Talk of Justice and Peace Today” held on 8-12 October 2014. The consultation was held in Dhulikhel, a town in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains, which have been a source of spiritual awakening and inspiration for many was the venue of the consultation. Interreligious in orientation and inter-generational in composition, our group consisted of Hindu and Christian religious leaders, scholars of Hinduism and Christianity, youth leaders, theologians, social and environmental activists, representatives of mission organizations and social workers.

We engaged in conversation on various issues of importance for Hindu-Christian cooperation. These included religious fundamentalism, the questions of religious conversions, gender and caste-based discrimination, youth and social transformation and conflict-resolution and peacebuilding.

After a meaningful time of dialogue and debate the group came to the following common conclusions:

- We recognize that both the Hindu and Christian spiritual traditions offer the imperative and inspiration to engage in interreligious conversation and collaboration.
- We agree that the religious idea of pilgrimage (common within both Hindu and Christian traditions) can provide Hindus and Christians with a common vision of a people’s movement which is oriented towards social, economic and eco-justice.
- We understand interreligious encounters essentially as “dia-praxis” – as common collaborative action – for the betterment of the entire creation.
- We condemn and oppose the rise of aggressive and divisive fundamentalist forces which lead to religious violence and pledge to strive for an equal, just and humane society.
- We acknowledge that the dehumanizing phenomenon of caste exists within both Christian and Hindu traditions and therefore affirm the ethical imperative to root out caste-based discrimination on the basis of both the Hindu vision of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (universal kinship of the created order) and the innate divinity of all humanity and the Christian vision of a divine reign of love, justice and peace.
- We pledge to walk the talk of justice and peace
 - a) By committing ourselves to uphold the moralities of religion with the understanding that all religions teach peace, love, amity and tolerance.
 - b) By opposing the abuse of religion for political goals.
 - c) By recognizing the right of people to opt for their own personal choice of religion in a context of complete freedom.
 - d) By acknowledging the existence of caste in South Asian communities and committing to work against the dehumanizing graded hierarchy of caste.
 - e) By accepting to struggle against the practice of gender hierarchy which often finds religious legitimacy and sanctions different forms of violence

- against women, both domestic and societal.
- f) By resisting the oppression and persecution of religious minorities, all forms of hate-mongering in the name of religion and the commercialization of religion.
 - g) By seeking to understand the challenges faced by large sections of youth relating to religious and social values in our changing world and committing to work for the vision of a society which gives a rightful place to the aspirations of youth.
 - h) By promoting mutual and bilateral exchange of ideas and learning between youth and other sections of society wherever possible in our own contexts.
- i) By understanding that peace building is a multi-layered process requiring intervention at the grass-root societal level.
 - j) By advocating for the acceptance of a diverse and plural society.
 - k) By seeking to build bridges between different religious communities and committing ourselves to the building up of an alliance of religions, whereby religions become instruments of a universal vision of peace and justice through which hope and healing become possible for the entire creation.

Book Review

Your God, My God, Our God: Rethinking Christian Theology for Religious Plurality. By S. Wesley Ariarajah. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2012).

S. Wesley Ariarajah's *Your God, My God, Our God* reflects an "insider's struggle" (19) to make sense of beliefs in the Christian tradition (19). With a theological conviction that there is a need to move beyond "received theology" (13), Ariarajah calls for what he symbolically names "Jerusalem II" (28), recognizing that the challenge of religious plurality is one of the most significant challenges to Christian theology today. He thus embarks on an endeavour to "re-understand and re-interpret" (12) some of Christianity's fundamental "functioning beliefs" and symbols (13). While acknowledging that the Bible has often been used for conservative and fundamentalist interpretations – something he does not advocate – Ariarajah simultaneously argues that his case is within the "parameters of biblical teaching" (166). This sets up a significantly interesting theological plot.

In the process of re-interpreting and re-understanding the language and grammar of Christian faith, Ariarajah is not shy to propose that Christians need to depart from certain classical Christian interpretations owing to their exclusivist positions. Consider "mission", for instance. He makes the point that a rereading of the so-called "great commission" in Matthew 28 "to go out and make disciples of all nations," is a "colonial understanding of the nature of Christian mission" (156). The gospel narratives, as he sees them, show that Jesus held the Jewish understanding of what constituted mission, which was not about "winning" the world for Christ. To the contrary, he affirms that the call to discipleship is to participate in God's healing mission of the world primarily through solidarity with the poor and the oppressed. It also means "witnessing" to the truth by

being faithful to the life of righteousness that was demanded of Christians rather than making verbal proclamations about their God (151).

In addition to departing from certain theological positions, Ariarajah also creatively engages with Christian doctrines, which are otherwise considered "non-negotiable" and reinterprets them. Noting that doctrines have often contributed to the negative assessment of other religious traditions, he recommends moving away from the "three person-one God" formula (70). He affirms that Trinitarian belief is non-sectarian in its essence. For him, the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus reveal love's dynamism that is at the heart of the universe. Faith in God as Trinity – one who creates, redeems and sanctifies – thus affirms God's creative love and presence in the whole universe, recognizing that God reveals Godself in many ways (74).

Picking up another doctrine for reinterpretation, "Sin", he argues that along with "individual sin", the Hebrew Scriptures also emphasize corporate sin (86-87). The disregard for corporate sin has led to the failure to address social, corporate and structural sins such as racism, sexism, casteism and other inherently oppressive and corrupt systems (98). We notice that reinterpretation is a consistent hermeneutical method in Ariarajah's pursuit. This method is interested in returning to the fundamentals of faith in order to retrieve inclusive and just interpretations. This calls for critical attention among lay Christians and professional theologians alike.

Ariarajah argues against the theologically pessimistic view that human beings have no agency to be co-workers in mending a broken world (96). Rejecting such pessimism, he attempts to offer an adequate theology of religions, which focuses on the need to expound and expand upon

dimensions of Christian symbols that have been neglected or ignored in order to discover relevant conceptualizations of faith in a pluralistic world. Here again he is at odds with those whose Christological reflection focuses on the “Christ of faith” (109). Ariarajah, by contrast, emphasizes the need to focus on Jesus’ life and teachings. He lifts up the mending of a broken world that is at the heart of God in order to show that the mission to heal is one that is incumbent on people from all religions, cultures and nations and not just Christians (120).

He argues that the cross has often been mistakenly understood as a symbolic representation of Christ’s sacrificial death. He agrees with feminist and womanist theologians who argue that such interpretations put the burden of suffering on those who are weak while condoning oppressive structures that cause such suffering. Thus moving away from one or two dominant ways of understanding the cross, he argues for a plurality of Christologies to understand salvation that includes voices and perspectives from the non-Western world (145).

His view also conflicts with those who see creation through the lens of incarnation, which stresses a unilinear mode of thinking: creation-fall-redemption-consummation. In order to develop a relevant theology of

religions, Ariarajah argues that Christians need to emphasize that creation and redemption are not just linear with the Fall as an unfortunate middle. Rather, Christians are to work with people of other faiths to give flesh to an understanding of creation that emphasizes God’s continuing relationship with and activity in the world. Ariarajah claims that dominant exclusivist Christian theology has failed to see that many Christian symbols are, as a matter of fact, non-exclusive and therefore when revisited with new eyes, mitigate against forms of exclusivism (29).

Despite his ecumenical thinking, Ariarajah’s book is limited in its scope. Roman Catholic perspectives are minimal. However, he enters the universal through a particular window and has much to offer from his Protestant sources. His attempt to deal with five symbols of Christian faith – namely, God, Sin, Salvation, Christ and Mission – by linking them to the task of doing an adequate theology of religions deserves wide reading and discussion. Today, when religions are debating whose received faith is the “higher” good, Ariarajah’s book contributes positively to interreligious dialogue.

Reviewed by Ms Ester Jamir, MTS, Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts and member of the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India (CBCNEI).

News from the WCC Interreligious Dialogue Office and Networks

Future Events

A Christian-Confucian Dialogue will be organized by the World Council of Churches in April 2016. This will be the first time that the World Council of Churches will be engaging in dialogue with Confucians. This dialogue will take place in South Korea in Andong, a major centre of Confucianism. This dialogue will be important for WCC member churches in China, Japan and South Korea and will make interreligious dialogue more meaningful to these countries. The consultation will seek to foster better relations, mutual respect and potential cooperation between leaders of these two religious communities to enable them to work together for the common good.

Forthcoming Books

Two books which culminate from the efforts of the programme on Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation will be published by the World Council of Churches this fall:

Many Yet One? Multiple Religious Belonging (Edited by Joseph Prabhakar Dayam and Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar)

Specs: 288 pages, 6 x 9", paper, perfect bound, 4-colour cover, ISBN 978-2-8254-1669-3, Price: CHF 29.00; £20.00; €20.00; \$25.00

While we tend to think of religions as distinct, univocal, even competing traditions, the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging is widespread, both historically and today. Alive to a variety of traditions and regions, this volume explores the reality of religious hybridity—whether because of cultural inheritance, family circumstances, or explicit choice—its confounding of traditional categories in theology and the study of religion, and its meaning for Christian theology. Even as it

complexifies the idea of religious identity, the authors show, it enriches our understanding of ultimate reality and the whole range of practices by which humans relate to it.

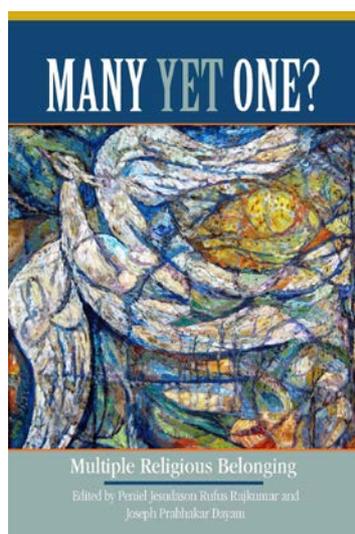
Who Do We Say That We Are? Christian Identity in a Multi-Religious World (Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation Programme)

Specs: 64 pages; A5; paper; perfect bound; 4-colour cover, ISBN: 978-2-8254-1675-4, Price: CHF 7.00; £5.00; €5.00; \$7.00; September 2015

“Particularly since the beginning of the 21st century, political, ideological, and religious shifts have given a new edge to the need for Christians to engage appropriately with religious plurality,” say the authors of this illuminating work. Their statement, fruit of ten years of consultations about Christianity’s encounter with and relation to other major religious traditions, is in aid of Christians’ self-understanding as they live and work and dialogue with people of other faiths.

What is core to Christian identity? What is peripheral? How can the claims of Christian belief be reconciled to open encounter with others who think differently? The sections of this document explore some key aspects of how Christian identity has been challenged by religious diversity, and how Christian commitment may actually be nourished by meeting in dialogue with those who do not share our perspective. Building on and elaborated through an explicitly Trinitarian framework, it explores each locus through its core convictions and how they can be newly discovered and deepened in interreligious exchange. Rather than be threatened by the increase in religious plurality, this statement shows, Christians can come to new and more profound appreciation of their own identity through interreligious interaction.

From WCC Publications



Many yet One?

Multiple Religious Belonging

Edited by Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar and Joseph Prabhakar Dayam

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Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar is programme executive for interreligious dialogue and cooperation, World Council of Churches.

Joseph Prabhakar Dayam is Associate Professor and Chairperson of the Department of Theology and Ethics at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Chennai, India.

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