Spiritual Danger and Interreligious Participation

Joseph Kimmel

This article explores the significance of a particular attitude toward religious others, drawing on recent insights about interreligious participation. Based on the author's own experiences living among evangelical Christian missionaries in Tibet, this article highlights cautionary voices that often go unheard in discussions of interreligious learning. While many people eagerly learn from figures who advance interreligious engagement through dialogue or ritual participation, how can we also learn to heed the perspectives of those who warn of the potential dangers of such engagement? How can we make sense of the relationship drawn by some religious devotees between interreligious participation and spiritual danger (e.g., spiritual contamination, malevolent beings)? How can we take seriously this oft-neglected religious perspective, even as we may seek to distance ourselves from its apparent shortcomings and blind spots? What, more generally, is the role of supernatural power(s) in the context of comparative theological study and interreligious engagement? Tackling such questions, this article addresses concerns about the spiritual power that is accessed through participation in religious rituals and the danger, perceived by many people, that results from interreligious engagement. In short, it elucidates how concerns about malevolent spiritual powers can be taken seriously, possibly learning from this perspective without demonizing religious others and thereby undercutting any possibility for interreligious participation.

Keywords: interreligious participation, interreligious learning, spiritual danger, spiritual power, spiritual contamination, demons

About ten years ago, while studying Tibetan in Lhasa, Tibet, I became friends with several Swedish engineers. These engineers had moved to Lhasa with their families a few years prior to my arrival through a partnership between a Swedish nonprofit organization (NPO) and the Chinese government. In return for visas, Tibetan residence permits, and a modest salary, the Swedes assisted Chinese engineering teams in the planning and construction of bridges and other infrastructure projects throughout central Tibet. But while at some level the Swedish crews genuinely were committed to improving the infrastructure of the Tibetan countryside, their primary mission in Tibet, I soon learned, was a religious one. Each of the Swedish engineers was an evangelical Christian working through an NPO whose fundamental goal was spreading the Gospel and converting non-Christians.

One day while talking with these covert missionaries, I casually mentioned that from time to time I liked to walk through some of the beautiful, historic Buddhist temples featured prominently in the Lhasa cityscape. Upon hearing of my visits to these temples, the conversation grew awkwardly quiet until one of the older Swedes advised me never to enter any of Lhasa's temples again. He told me that these are not places of harmless, picturesque beauty but—quite the opposite—they overflow with dangerous spiritual power. For him, those places possess a demonic power that a Christian need not fear but should not provoke. By way of illustration, my friend told me that a few months before I arrived in Tibet, a short-term missions team from America came to Lhasa in order to evangelize the local population. Upon entering the city's main temple, several members of the group immediately began vomiting and could not stop until

they left the temple grounds, at which point all their symptoms suddenly ceased. My evangelical friend reasoned that such symptoms offered strong evidence of demonic power directed against the missionaries when they entered the demon's residence.

Of course, other viable explanations exist for the American missionaries' physiological reactions. But for the purposes of this essay, I would like to take seriously the possibility of theological truth residing in the sense meant by my Swedish interlocutor. In this light, I explore here the implications of such a view while referencing recent approaches to interreligious ritual participation and comparative theological study. Such a worldview, at first glance, does not seem particularly conducive to interreligious ritual participation or comparative theology. Nevertheless, I believe that it raises a host of very important questions and considerations regarding such activities that require critical attention, namely: What is the role of supernatural power in the context of comparative study and interreligious participation? How do we, as comparative religious or theological scholars, address concerns about the power that is engaged and accessed via religious rituals, i.e., the power of spiritual beings (e.g., gods, demons) who in the theologies of many people may pose some degree of danger to those joining the rituals of others?[1]Although interreligious participation may be engaged purely from a theoretical viewpoint, or even for the sake of personal spiritual enrichment, how do we address concerns that such behavior can unintentionally open oneself to malevolent spiritual forces beyond one's control? Furthermore, how do we take seriously this religious perspective, perhaps even learning from it, even as we may wish to distance ourselves from its shortcomings and blind spots? In this spirit, is there space for interreligious engagement that may simultaneously maintain such theological views regarding demons vis-à-vis religious others without demonizing religious others themselves and thereby undercutting any possibility for interreligious learning?

Accordingly, in the remainder of this essay, I would like to engage at least some of these questions by considering them in light of insights raised by scholars Mark Heim,[2] Anantanand Rambachan,[3] and Rachel Reedijk.[4] Each one of these scholars contributes a perspective in the 2015 volume *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue*, edited by Marianne Moyaert and Joris Geldhof, that complicates interreligious participation. While Rambachan writes most optimistically about the value of religious education in enabling participation in the spiritual traditions of others, Heim and Reedijk articulate counter-perspectives that urge caution due to the potential dangers of such participation. In the section that follows, a brief overview of the main arguments of each of these scholars aims to elucidate their specific insights concerning the

[1] Related questions not directly addressed in this essay include whether these concerns about the "dangerous power" of other religious traditions are truly justified. For example, to what extent are there ontologically real "powers" that need to be taken seriously (despite Enlightenment-influenced protests to the contrary)? If so, what is the relationship between these "dark powers" and other religious traditions? When is the conservative Christian outcry about "demons" an important call to heed, and when is it merely misinformed, and possibly a neocolonialist demonization of the religious other? Reflexively, is this a false dichotomy altogether?

[2] Mark Heim, "On Doing What Others Do: Intentions and Intuitions in Multiple Religious Practice," in *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries, Transgressions and Innovations*, ed. Marianne Moyaert and Joris Geldhof (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 19–32.

[3] Anantanand Rambachan, "Offering and Receiving Hospitality: The Meaning of Ritual Participation in the Hindu Temple," in Moyaert and Geldhof, *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue*, 125–37.

[4] Rachel Reedijk, "Transgressing and Setting Ritual Boundaries: A Puzzling Paradox," in Moyaert and Geldhof, *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue*, 181–94.

limitations to interreligious participation. In particular, one's sense of danger in such situations comes into focus, along with whether and how these limits might be transcended.

The Protestant theologian Mark Heim, for instance, explores the interaction of personal intention, intuition, and interreligious learning in relation to one's practice of multiple religious traditions. As a comparative theologian, Heim discusses how an individual's desire to "do what (religious) others do" often creates a situation in which that person practices others' rituals without necessarily sharing precisely the same intentions as members of the religious community in which the rituals find their home. He cites as an example Brian McLaren, an American pastor who observes the fast of Ramadan with Muslim friends but does so to "express his concern and respect for Muslims."[5] Yet these intentions, of course, are unlikely to be motivating the fasts of McLaren's Muslim companions. In turn, Heim then analyzes the role spiritual intuitions play in shaping one's desire for and practice of the religious rituals of others. Referencing research in moral psychology conducted by Jonathan Haidt, Heim discusses how deeply embedded and possibly subconscious concerns can influence one's experience of interreligious participation.[6] In reflecting on the role that interreligious education can play in shaping these spiritual intuitions—and thereby also influencing one's desire to participate in the rituals of others—Heim then observes that a sense of spiritual danger may powerfully prevent certain people from seeking to learn and experience more of others' religious traditions. Reflecting some of the concerns expressed by my Swedish friends, Heim writes:

> There are sometimes those for whom physical entry into [a religious] building or site itself is a matter of serious debate. This reaction is sometimes fueled by ignorance about the tradition involved or a prior demonization of it. But this is not always true: [...] there is a kind of negative reverence for the sacred character of the place in question, a recognition that it represents and conveys *real spiritual powers* that are not identical with and may not be controllable by [a person's] own religious resources. They believe that real effects are exercised on a visitor by presence and practice in that place, regardless of the intention with which a visitor may enter.[7]

Intention, for some, may be largely irrelevant as a matter of interreligious participation, according to Heim. Due to the "real spiritual powers" that reside in such locales, for example, visiting the sacred space of another religious group poses a risk regardless of one's personal intentions or intuitions.

This observation complicates the assumption, advanced by Anantanand Rambachan, that education alone is sufficient to overcome "demonization" of other religious groups and can enable all people to participate across religious boundaries.[8] Rambachan expresses such a

[5] Heim, "On Doing What Others Do," 22.

[6] Ibid., 25. This discussion adopts and is organized around Haidt's six binaries, specifically care/harm, fairness/cheating, liberty/oppression, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation. For further consideration of these binaries, see Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).

[7] Heim, "On Doing What Others Do," 27. Emphasis is mine.

[8] Those who perceive the sacred spaces of other religious traditions as dangerous may be prevented not only from participating in the rituals of religious others, as discussed above by Heim, but may also avoid the various kinds of

position in his essay "Offering and Receiving Hospitality: The Meaning of Ritual Participation in the Hindu Temple," in which he contends that interreligious learning has significant value in helping to correct misunderstandings and unfounded fears about the practices of other religious groups. Toward this end, Rambachan explains for a non-Hindu audience the features of a typical Hindu *pūjā* ritual, thereby seeking explicitly to counter misperceptions that such worship is either "idolatrous" or "polytheistic."[9] Specifically, Rambachan casts the *pūjā* ceremony in terms more easily acceptable to those of a monotheistic background by explaining how the apparent "polytheism" is really a celebration of "One True Being" in that Being's multitudinous forms. Moreover, what may appear to some as "idolatry" is, according to Rambachan, the worship of a singular Divinity in his or her many manifestations.[10] By thus walking an imagined non-Hindu visitor through the stages of a *pūjā* ceremony and explaining aspects of the ritual that either a Jew or a Christian, for example, might find especially confusing or difficult to accept, Rambachan illustrates how education can break down ideological barriers that exist more so in one's religious imagination than in reality.[11] Deftly anticipating the potential misinterpretations of religious others, Rambachan shows how increased understanding can challenge common objections raised by those of Judeo-Christian backgrounds to participating in acts of Hindu worship. By showing that such objections are often rooted in misunderstanding, such attitudes may thus be overcome through religious learning and in turn may lead a non-Hindu toward interreligious participation.

But can this kind of education be effective in fostering interreligious participation for those, like the evangelical Swedes in Lhasa, who are convinced that "real spiritual powers" dangerously lurk in the sacred spaces of others? Is such an educational approach even an appropriate or a wise course of action if those who hold such viewpoints are correct? Addressing these concerns about transgressing ritual boundaries, the anthropologist Rachel Reedijk examines Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities in four European countries—the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and the Netherlands.[12] Through in-depth interviews of forty-four

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interreligious learning that can occur through comparative theological study. Perceptions of spiritual danger may thus pose a challenge to each of the four types of comparative learning that Catherine Cornille identifies—intensification, recovery/rediscovery, reinterpretation, and appropriation—in "The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology," in *How to Do Comparative Theology: European and American Perspectives in Dialogue*, ed. Francis X. Clooney, S.J. and Klaus von Stosch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 19–36; esp. 29–31. This discussion, however, lies beyond the scope of this essay.

[9] Rambachan, "Offering and Receiving Hospitality," 133.

[10] Ibid., 133–5.

[11] From a Christian perspective, see, e.g., Michael Barnes, S.J., "Living Interreligiously: On the 'Pastoral Style' of Comparative Theology," in Clooney and von Stosch, *How to do Comparative Theology*, 301–23. Rambachan's approach dovetails nicely with how Michael Barnes, S.J., describes London's Buddhapadipa Temple. For Barnes, learning about the sacred spaces of other religious traditions illustrates how a "prayerful 'reading' of another [religious] world" (302) reveals the compatibilities in style between comparative theology and pastoral theology. Read together, Barnes's and Rambachan's articles reinforce each other and particularly show how descriptions of the religious "worlds" conveyed through others' sacred spaces can enable both interreligious ritual participation and comparative theology. Moreover, consider Emma O'Donnell, "Methodological Considerations on the Role of Experience in Comparative Theology," in Clooney and von Stosch, *How to do Comparative Theology*, 259–70, especially whether such an approach creates comparative theological possibilities that are experiential, rather than purely textual. If so, it may address and even develop, as O'Donnell indicates, "new ways to take into account the ritual, performed, and experiential nature of religion" (260).

[12] Reedijk, "Transgressing and Setting Ritual Boundaries," 181–94; see esp. 182, where she defines her interdisciplinary methodology as "anthropological, theological, philosophical, and psychological."

"key figures of Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue," concentrating on their experiences of interreligious dialogue and participation in the rituals of religious others, Reedijk found that the majority of her respondents spoke of their interreligious experiences in positive or neutral terms. However, seven of the forty-four interviewees voiced strong concerns about engaging in others' rituals. While not referencing demonic beings or malevolent, "real spiritual powers," these seven still perceived interreligious participation as inherently imbued with danger.

These perceptions of spiritual danger fall broadly into two categories: first, the threat of the slippery slope and, secondly, spiritual contamination. As for the first, one Jewish man expressed concern that simply dialoguing with religious others will lead one to associate more intimately with members of the other faith: moving from talking with them to eating with them, and then even to marrying them. Ultimately, this slippery process would lead one to "forget" and perhaps abandon one's own tradition. Similarly, an Orthodox Christian worried that simply "watching" another's rituals, if done "with a curious mind, unavoidably opens the door to the relativization and hence corruption of the truth."[13] Both of these respondents thus perceived interreligious dialogue and participation in terms of danger and threat, constituting in effect a slippery slope that is virtually certain, beginning with either dialogue or observing others' rituals and then ending in the corruption of "the truth" and the abandonment of one's tradition.

Spiritual contamination is the second type of danger that Reedijk's interviewees identify as a result of celebrating religious rituals with members of another faith tradition.[14] This fear was expressed by one Muslim man who described how the "first-generation immigrants" in his mosque do not want outsiders to visit the mosque because "they think that the mosque will become ritually unclean if a non-Muslim who has eaten a pork sandwich sets foot on their premises."[15] This danger, in a sense, thus represents the inverse concern of the evangelical Swedes. On the one hand, both the evangelicals and first-generation Muslim immigrants perceive interreligious participation as a dangerous, spiritually contaminating activity. However, for the evangelicals, this danger is incurred if they were to enter a Buddhist temple whereas, for the Muslims, it arises whenever non-Muslims enter their mosque.

Such views of the danger of interreligious dialogue and ritual participation—whether from malevolent beings, a slippery slope leading to loss of faith, or ritual impurity—complicate the tacit belief in the educative approach of Rambachan that interreligious learning will enable members of different religious traditions to participate in each other's rituals. While learning across religious boundaries certainly may aid some people who already possess some degree of openness to learning about—and even perhaps from—others, it is unlikely to be effective for those who see interreligious education itself as a threat to be avoided or resisted. Moreover, Rambachan's approach may have limited, if any, effect upon those who seek to learn about others only to convert them to one's own tradition.[16] In addition, when resistance to

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[13] Ibid., 185.

[14] For a seminal analysis of the relationship between rituals and perceptions of purity, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966). See esp. ch. 1 on understandings of ritual uncleanness and ch. 8 on the relationship between impurity and behavior deemed immoral by one's community.

[15] Reedijk, "Transgressing and Setting Ritual Boundaries,"187.

[16] See Glenn R. Willis, "On Some Suspicions Regarding Comparative Theology," in Clooney and von Stosch, *How to Do Comparative Theology*, 132. Willis seems to view the interreligious learning that occurs in comparative theology as

interreligious engagement occurs at the level of entire communities, as substantiated in Reedijk's example of first-generation Muslim immigrants, efforts to educate across religious borders may be particularly unwelcome and perhaps seen as unethical. Such educational efforts, from the perspective of these communities, likely will be seen not as a pathway toward personal spiritual growth and increased understanding but actually as a means for becoming deluded and manipulated by forces that oppose those of one's trusted spiritual community.

If learning across religious boundaries through interreligious ritual participation is thus resisted as profoundly threatening, what about less experiential approaches, such as learning about other religions' ideas and doctrines through comparative theology and/or religious literacy? In regard to the former, Francis Clooney articulates a way of learning from the texts of other traditions in a manner that does not require one to participate in other religions' rituals. In fact, while eagerly learning from Hindu texts, he details his own reticence to participate in Hindu rituals, when he writes, for example, that during a visit to a temple of the Hindu goddess Lakṣmī, he watched the temple's activities but did not participate in its worship, because "Christians do not worship Goddesses."[17] By contrast, Clooney has no qualms about pairing Christian and Hindu devotional texts and, via a "double reading" of each text in light of the other, learning from both traditions.[18] While this approach may have the advantage from a conservative religious viewpoint of not requiring one to participate in a foreign set of rituals, I doubt whether Reedijk's Muslim respondents or my Swedish evangelical friends would regard such interreligious learning as significantly less dangerous than ritual participation. This is due, I believe, to a fundamental difference at the level of one's theology of religions between the welcoming inclusivism of a comparative theologian like Clooney and the sharp exclusivism[19] of more conservative individuals for whom the paraphernalia of other traditions—regardless of whether these are rituals, texts, ideas, spaces, sounds, or something else—are by virtue of their spiritual "otherness"[20] perceived as dangerous and to be avoided.[21]

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beneficial only insofar as it aids one in promulgating the tenets of one's religious tradition: "A comparative theology should be an apologetic theology if it is to be constructive and vital." Such a perspective utilizes interreligious learning only to solidify one further in the "truth" of one's own tradition and not to facilitate interreligious participation. Willis's use of interreligious education thus challenges Rambachan's belief that such learning beneficially supports interreligious ritual engagement.

[17] Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 88.

[18] As he does, for instance, in: Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Sri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008).

[19] In using the terminology of inclusivism and exclusivism, I reference the theological vocabulary of Alan Race—discussed at length in James Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999)—whose schema of exclusivism/inclusivism/pluralism articulates three perspectives on the value (soteriologically, epistemically, etc.) of other religions in comparison with one's own. The soteriological aspect of Christian exclusivism is often emphasized as paramount, and while this concern was certainly a priority of my evangelical missionary friends, I believe their exclusivism extended to proximate areas like epistemology and ethics, such that visiting Buddhist temples was perceived as dangerous not only in a salvific sense (i.e., the threat to the salvation of one's soul) but also in a more immediate sense due to other dangers associated with entering a "demonic" residence (e.g., spiritual confusion, increased temptation to act immorally).

[20] This spiritual "otherness" is particularly salient among groups espousing an exclusivist theology of religions because, in contrast to inclusivist or pluralist perspectives that might view religious differences favorably, such "otherness" is associated, as seen above, with threat, including that of contamination, falsehood, and the demonic.

[21] Also relevant to this discussion is the scholarship of Amos Yong, especially his *Pneumatology and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue: Does the Spirit Blow Through the Middle Way?*. In the third major section of this text, Yong articulates a theology of "divine absence," in which he argues that Christian and Buddhist approaches to the demonic, while differing in

For such individuals perhaps the only kind of interreligious engagement that may be welcomed would be one that would facilitate learning *about* other traditions without necessarily learning *from* them.[22] While this approach may still be resisted by those, like the respondent in Reedijk's study, who see any kind of interreligious exposure as toying dangerously with the corrupting force of religious curiosity, instruction in basic religious literacy may be perceived by other conservative practitioners as relatively harmless and perhaps even valuable.[23]

In summary, Heim, Rambachan, and Reedijk each address the issue of spiritual danger in interreligious participation from different angles that nuance and to some extent mutually complicate one another. While Heim primarily focuses on interiority in ritual engagement across religious boundaries, specifically on the roles played by intentions and intuitions, he acknowledges that for some people the danger posed by "real spiritual powers" is so threatening that interreligious participation, regardless of intention, becomes an impossible activity. Rambachan has a somewhat different focus, as he optimistically outlines how interreligious learning might break down—or at least erode—boundaries of misunderstanding that prevent Jews or Christians from participating in Hindu ceremonies. Largely directed at those who already possess some willingness to learn about other religious communities, this approach may not be particularly effective among those who see the sites, rituals, and communities of other religions as potentially dangerous because, for example, they are believed to mediate the malevolent presence of threatening spiritual beings. Such concerns over spiritual danger are clearly expressed by several of Reedijk's interviewees, for whom interreligious participation is fraught with various forms of threat, including personal "contamination" and a "slippery slope" that gradually leads one away from one's home tradition. Spiritual danger, in the views of these respondents as well as those of my Swedish missionary friends, thus comprises the threat from other religious traditions that adopts any of a variety of forms (from personal, harmful beings (e.g., demons) to impersonal states of spiritual impurity) and provides strong impetus to avoid the sites and experiences believed to convey such harm. Alternate approaches for interreligious learning, such as the comparative method of Francis Clooney, are not likely to be warmly embraced, given the tendency to tie all aspects of other traditions (whether rituals, texts, or something else) to a common, dangerous denominator. Basic religious literacy, by contrast, may be welcomed, but likely only insofar as one can learn *about* other traditions—a strategy by which one maintains a high degree of control (or at least a sense of control) over the interreligious encounter—without having to embrace the relatively more vulnerable position of learning *from* them.

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key respects, can generally be understood as allies against a common enemy. In articulating this theological inclusivism vis-à-vis demonic encounter, Yong conveys a theology of religions that, like Clooney's, would likely be resisted by Christians who consider demons not (or not only) a common enemy of multiple religious traditions but actually inherent to all traditions other than one's own. See: Amos Yong, *Pneumatology and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue: Does the Spirit Blow Through the Middle Way?* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

[22] See, for example, the religious literacy approach of Diane Moore in: Diane Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[23] Such value may be understood in a variety of ways. While in Lhasa, my evangelical friends asked me to hold some brief classes for their children on "world religions." I believe a number of goals lay behind this request: on the one hand, their children could learn basic information about other religions and cultures, while on the other hand such knowledge could be used to inoculate their kids against these alternate traditions by emphasizing their contrast with Christianity. Such prizing of the apologetic value of interreligious learning echoes the position of Glenn Willis who sees comparative theology as beneficial only insofar as it pursues apologetic goals (see footnote 16).

Finally, what are we to conclude about this cautionary way of regarding religious others? Though this approach may strike us in liberally minded universities as a narrow, misinformed, or even pathetic way of interacting with the surrounding world, can we really be so sure that such assumptions are correct? To state the issue differently, in the spirit of comparative inquiry, what might we learn from the conservative perspectives expressed by Reedijk's Muslim respondents and my Swedish evangelical friends? How do we honor these views, considering where they may illuminate our own blind spots, rather than ignoring or rejecting them as "obviously" wrong? While I do not in any way wish to endorse the demonization of religious traditions, I believe that a commitment to interreligious learning demands listening carefully to the perspectives and concerns of these conservative groups. When one does so, one is challenged to come to terms with the risks and dangers potentially inherent in any interreligious engagement—risks and dangers that fundamentally challenge notions of agency and control in interreligious ritual participation. More specifically, conservative cautionary voices suggest that one who participates in the rituals of other religions, while perhaps believing oneself to be in control of the religious experience, actually may open oneself to a variety of unexpected dangers, including spiritual confusion, contamination, and/or attack from malevolent spiritual beings. My point is not that such dangers are necessarily or always "real," but that taking interreligious learning seriously demands that we seriously consider that very possibility: in other words, that we honor not only the pluralistic impulse to learn from—and participate in—the traditions of others, but that we also listen carefully to those voices urging caution against doing so. Ironically, in articulating their concerns, conservative believers, like my Swedish friends, actually may afford other traditions more respect than those who facilely dabble in their rituals, because in taking seriously the spiritual "power" (interpreted as "danger") of other traditions, conservatives implicitly honor these traditions as spiritually and ontologically significant, albeit dangerously so.[24]

In the end, I did not follow the advice of the evangelical engineers from Sweden. I continued to visit Lhasa's temples, allowing repeated engagement with the Tibetan Buddhist culture around me to reshape my own religious presuppositions and to teach me ways of "being religious" that I had not previously encountered. But the evangelical missionaries' profound concerns over the danger of interreligious encounter, and their conviction of the real threat from malevolent spiritual beings residing in Buddhist temples, provoked within me a host of challenging questions about the nature of evil, the risks of interreligious participation, and the project of comparative religious study—questions that revealed how my own assumptions might blind me to religious correlations, even realities, that others perceive more clearly.

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[24] A recent American example of such "backhanded" religious respect may be seen in the evangelical Christian response to the proposed introduction of yoga in elementary schools of the Encinitas Union School District in Encinitas, California. While school administrators touted the physical and psychological benefits of yogic practice, the evangelical outcry against its introduction focused on yoga's spiritually transformative power, including its ability to aid practitioners in moving through a series of spiritual stages that culminate in "absorption in the Universal." Evangelical Christians' resistance to the introduction of yoga into public schools on the grounds of not wanting these spiritually transformative effects to be experienced by their children arguably affords this Hindu practice greater respect than those who promote it as a de-spiritualized exercise regimen. See: Will Carless, "Yoga Class Draws a Religious Protest." *New York Times*, December 15, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/16/us/school-yoga-class-draws-religious-protest-from-christians.html.

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