

The Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue™

# Starting the Conversation

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Dear Readers,

The use of academic discourse to effect practical change has seldom been more important than in the field of inter-religious dialogue. The careful study of interactions that take place between religious communities holds the potential to significantly improve relations between groups, as well as the individuals who comprise them. The Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue™ seeks to bring together religious, civic, academic, and non-profit leaders of all ages and backgrounds to ensure that lessons derived from scholarship are directly applied through practical programming for religious communities.

Through its free online platform ([www.irdialogue.org](http://www.irdialogue.org)), the Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue™ seeks to make its peer reviewed publication available to as wide an audience as possible, irrespective of the financial means or place of residence of its readers. The Journal's website also provides a moderated forum for continued discussion related to the articles. We hope that it provides you with a means of reflecting upon the articles and gleaning additional insights from each one. You are invited to distribute copies of the Journal in PDF format to colleagues, students, mentors, and friends in order to create dialogues of your own.

We felt it fitting for the inaugural issue of the Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue™ to be entitled "Starting the Conversation." In discussing the dynamics of dialogue itself, we hope to provide a basis for more specific discussions, both for this semi-annual publication and programs taking place within and between religious communities. We hope that you enjoy it and look forward to continuing the conversation with you online.

With warm regards,

Joshua Zaslow Stanton and Stephanie Hughes,  
Editors-in-Chief

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## **Curiosity Instead of Fear: Literature as Creative Inter-Religious Dialogue**

By Ruth Illman

### **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to present an ongoing research project focusing on art as a holistic, personal and creative arena for inter-religious dialogue and to offer analytical reflections on such a renewed and integrated research agenda. Its findings, from a case study with literature, suggest that creative forms of dialogue can foment a fruitful combination of practical and ethical concerns and theoretical reflections. Empirical examples are given from interviews with two authors engaged in inter-religious dialogue: Jewish novelist Susanne Levin and the Christian playwright and novelist Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt.

### **Introduction**

I think really, we writers, we have a lot to do. We have a kind of mission: to create greater understanding, greater curiosity, greater tolerance and to make people accept the complexity of our identities, of our societies ... Yes, to create wisdom. That's the purpose of books.

These thoughts, which novelist and playwright Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, presented to me in an interview in June 2008, touch the heart of the research topic presented in this article: art, and especially literature, as a tool for inter-religious dialogue. To Schmitt, the task of creating inter-religious understanding and respect lies at the heart of his professional project. Writers may not be powerful players on the global political scene, he admits, but their work can nevertheless influence opinions and attitudes. This limited but productive power can be used to effect change: to increase the readers' imaginative interest in lives and realities utterly different from their own and evoke empathy towards other ways of embodying and expressing our shared but vulnerable human circumstances.

The aim of this article is to further analyze and discuss this position by posing the following three questions: Can the creative perspectives of religious otherness offered in literature promote respect, reliance, and reciprocity between persons of different faiths? Can fictitious stories build bridges of understanding and create positive openings in inter-religious situations? What is the role of the writer in this transformative process? The empirical analysis builds on reflections presented by two writers who deal in their novels with questions of religious difference and inter-religious dialogue: the above mentioned French author, Eric-Emmanuel

Schmitt, who is inspired by the Christian gospels, and the Swedish author, Susanne Levin, who is Jewish.

## A Creative Perspective on Inter-Religious Dialogue

Different forms of art – such as literature, music and film – are often used to portray the multi-religious and ethnically mixed situation prevailing in our world today. Such projects can either present a positive perspective on inter-religious encounters, advocating peace and human dignity, or a negative one, instigating division and enmity. Even so, creative forms of inter-religious dialogue are seldom analyzed in academic articles. Research topics are typically more sober and rational in appearance, such as the classical questions of who possesses the truth, and how to come to terms with the problem of difference (Deutsch 2004, 99). Opposing voices critique this intellectualized definition of truth. Willy Pfändtner notes that to regard different religions simply as rational belief systems with incompatible truth claims implies a problematic distortion of the multifaceted phenomenon under investigation, and offers rather limited prospects for inter-religious dialogue (Pfändtner 2005, 16, 19). To describe our contemporary situation, Marc Gopin suggests that models for meaningful co-existence need to be built on a comprehensive understanding of unique individuals rather than on abstract systems of thought. What is needed is an understanding of how dialogical world views are expressed in practical situations: How do those persons, who live deeply engaged in religious meaning systems, think and act and also show care beyond these boundaries (Gopin 2005, 56)?

The main aim of a research project I am currently pursuing is to provide such an alternative perspective – practical in application but intellectually thorough – focusing on art as a holistic, personal and creative arena of dialogue. The project investigates the forms and functions of inter-religious dialogue, primarily within the Abrahamic triad of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Focus is directed towards the contemporary inter-religious scene and its practical and ethical dimensions, rather than doctrinal comparisons. Comprehensive knowledge of the dialogue between these religions is of growing importance. As religions are increasingly regarded in a one-sided fashion as sources of intolerance and enmity, it is vital to achieve a deeper understanding for other, creative aspects of religious engagement (ter Haar 2005, 20-21). Hence, the project seeks an understanding of how persons engaging in creative forms of dialogue through different kinds of art create their religious identity in the juxtaposition of unity and separateness – honoring the dignity of difference while simultaneously promoting interdependence and the responsibility to cross the lines of faith respectfully (Esack 1987, 180). The interviews presented in this article are part of a larger body of empirical material collected for this project, which also includes interviews with musicians, filmmakers, poets and multimedia artists.

In order to bring forth new insight within the field of inter-religious dialogue, a theoretical commitment to diversity is needed. Therefore, the views of scholars rooted in different religious and academic traditions (such as comparative religion, theology, intercultural communication and conflict resolution theory) should be integrated. Dialogue with the religious other needs to be

viewed as a multidimensional process of interpretation and as a tangible question of peace, action, and power. By directing attention away from a purely rational view of inter-religious dialogue towards a more multifaceted understanding of human religiosity, a more diverse knowledge base can be created, with a fruitful combination of academic approaches and perspectives from outside the Western world (Pfändtner 2005, 105). Thus, my aim is to provide a way of tackling issues of discursive power, cultural and religious essentialism, and the intellectual bias of current inter-religious theory.

The present challenges that motivate such a renewed agenda are manifold. At a global level, the question of how to facilitate respectful inter-religious dialogue seems vital, especially in the close but complicated relationship between the children of Abraham (Russell 2006, 185). Furthermore, the role of religion in society seems to be under rapid transformation, described by Inger Furseth as a move from “finding truth” to “finding or being oneself (Furseth 2006, 296).” Hence, dogmatic and theoretical aspects of religions attract less interest as the demand for emotionally fulfilling experiences of faith increases. Religion is understood as an old-fashioned and rigid term, and consequently many people prefer the open and experimental notion of spirituality (Martikainen 2007, 367-370). Locating religious traditions within given geographical or social contexts is also becoming problematic, as people and ideas migrate around the world, drawn by adventure or forced by violence and poverty. On a personal level, many people no longer recognize the tradition of their parents as the one, self-evident, existential truth for themselves. Rather, religious identity is seen as a personal project of development: a flexible identification with ideas, expressions and sentiments suiting one’s outlook on life (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 3).

Even so, change and choice are ambiguous concepts, greeted by some with suspicion rather than excitement. In uncertain situations, differences in religion, culture, age, gender, class or political ideals are used to legitimate repudiation of the other (Omar 2006, 19). The effects range from discrimination to dehumanization, but the key problem is the same: difference is experienced as an anomaly, an unwanted threat. Information is often seen as a solution to such conflicts, as increased knowledge about the other is thought to replace prejudices with understanding and respect (Safi 2003, 3). Thus, dialogue is connected to knowledge, rational reasoning, consistency, and predictability. The problem of coming to terms with difference is thus regarded as an intellectual challenge of making the other intelligible and creating consistency in philosophical systems that propose contradictory ways of understanding notions such as truth, divinity and salvation (Pfändtner 2005, 109). Such text and tradition oriented efforts are of great importance for inter-religious dialogue, but seldom reach beyond the academic world to affect dialogue as a lived practice (Omar 2006, 18).

Furthermore, the fear of difference is not based on facts and reasoning alone. Our opinions and interpretations are formed and fed by emotions and experiences that have made an impact on us from early on in life and structure our responses to new situations in potentially irrational ways. Coming to terms with difference is not just a question of knowledge – it touches us on a deeper level as complex, interpreting, and insecure human beings. Therefore, many researchers today advocate more holistic approaches to dialogue in order to meet the challenges set forth by

our contemporary circumstances. Dialogue, it is argued, is not merely a cognitive capacity, but also an emotional engagement striving towards empathic recognition of the other as having a different but equally legitimate perspective on the world (Gross 1999, 365). To this background, it is valuable to add Willy Pfändtner's proposition to exchange religion for the *religious* in research on dialogue. Focusing on the religious subject stresses the active and interpersonal aspects of the communication and allows us to observe differences and similarities both within and between traditions (Pfändtner 2005, 16). Furthermore, it allows us to broaden the perspective of our investigations to include human characteristics, such as attitudes and emotions.

Similar integrated approaches to inter-religious dialogue are currently envisioned through, for example, feminist critiques and hermeneutic discourses, which also aim to explore alternative empirical research fields (Safi 2003, 11-15). Therefore the arts as arenas for inventive practices are recognized as complements to theoretical investigations and rhetorical debates. Here it is argued that the freedom of the creative approach can be experienced as a supplement to theoretical rules and regulations; imagination can play an enriching role, through which all aspects of our personalities can be engaged in building the dialogue (Bird 1995, v).

### Using Fiction to Promote Dialogue: Two Writers' Voices

With these critical remarks in mind, it is time to turn to the empirical material and give voice to the writers Susanne Levin and Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt.<sup>1</sup> How do they interpret their roles as artists engaged in inter-religious dialogue? How do they assess the possibility of novels to promote the broad, interpretative approach to inter-religious dialogue formulated in the theoretical discussion?

Susanne Levin (b. 1950) is the child of an Auschwitz survivor. She was born and raised in Sweden, where there is a small Jewish minority. To her, writing is a question of the heart; she feels compelled to write in order to endure and come to terms with the complexities of her Jewish heritage and to understand her own identity. Writing is thus necessary to survive. All her life, Levin explains, she has searched for meaning: Why did my mother survive? What is my responsibility? Therefore, she states: "I started to write in order to show the world what it means to be me, the child of a survivor. I feel I have a mission." Levin's motivation to write novels about inter-religious encounters, difference and estrangement – often with an autobiographical element – was triggered by her encounter with racist and anti-Semitic sentiments in the school where she works. There, she says, "I saw all those children they want to exclude in order to 'preserve Sweden Swedish.'" All of those frightened and silenced immigrant children reminded her of herself as a young girl who did not fit in: wrong hair color, wrong family name, wrong religion.

Levin frequently uses her novels as she teaches religion in multi-religious school classes. She is convinced that novels can reach out to young people, awaken their empathic abilities and create a respectful understanding of differences much more effectively than theoretical texts:

I'm certain that a novel can move people much deeper than scholarly reports. Because you can identify with the little girl, you can understand what it is like to be her, to feel estranged and be scared of making your voice heard. I am convinced that novels can touch the hearts of teenagers, I have seen it.

To “meet each other in respect” is the meaning of inter-religious dialogue to Levin, and she is certain that literature can be of great importance in facilitating such meetings, even though a novel may seem like a feeble tool. “The world is big and there is much evil in it, but you have to do your share,” Levin argues. “You have to believe in yourself and your ability to effect change.” To her, Judaism is about continuously building a kingdom of peace on earth, and her mission as a Jew within this broader process is to write novels. No one can change the whole world, but you have to find your own task and transform what is within your reach: “As it says in Talmud: the one who has saved a life, *one* life, he has saved the whole world! What more can you ask for?”

Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt (b. 1960) has reached a worldwide audience with his plays and novels on inter-religious dialogue, especially the series of four short novellas called *Le Cycle d'Invisible*. These narratives all deal with inter-religious encounters in a complex and compassionate way, as Schmitt is particularly concerned with preserving the mystery and divine nature of the situations he describes. To him, inter-religious encounters are complex challenges where not only two religions (as theoretical and historical constructions) stand against each other, but so do two human beings. In his compositions, the areas of difference transformed in the encounter are not one but several: Muslim-Jew, young-old, happy-sad, powerful-powerless, convinced-confused. Schmitt details, “I am obsessed with complexity! For me, it is a mistake to desire a simple solution, a simple truth, a unique algebraist formula. It's terrible because it's impossible. You have to fight against this obsession of simple ideas in order to accept complexity.” As shown in the introduction of this article, Schmitt interprets his task as a writer in a manner similar to that of Levin: to create understanding, respect and openness between persons of different faiths. Literature is the sense of complexity, Schmitt asserts, its purpose to legitimate different perspectives. “The purpose is not: What is true? The purpose is: How is it possible to live together?” Therefore, novels can be helpful in creating awareness of the necessity of a pluralistic humanity. Accepting complexity is the human way to survive. Including emotions in the description of inter-religious encounters is vital for Schmitt; it is one of the reasons why he abandoned a successful academic career as a philosopher to become a writer of fiction. Feelings often mark the beginning of an intellectual journey, he believes, because “you have to think inside life, inside your body, with your emotions.” This is where art becomes important to inter-religious dialogue, Schmitt concludes. By telling a fictitious but engaging story you can give your readers access to the religious other in a fresh and open, empathic and enriching way. In this respect, literature is much more effective than rational arguments: “It has to be incarnated; it has to be flesh and blood and feelings.”

Curiosity instead of fear and richness instead of one-dimensional truth claims are thus the guiding principles for Schmitt in his writing. Humor is another important element, he claims, because believing without humor becomes fanaticism: “I fight for humor in religions! I think it's

really an ethical point of view. It's to be aware that you don't know for sure, that you are weak, fragile and have no certainties. That's humor."

Schmitt calls himself a voluntary optimist, who has chosen to believe in the ability of literature to function as a creative and uniting counter-power to the economic rules and political tyranny of our contemporary society. "A pessimist says: Okay Satan, do your work, I don't care. But I care. And if there is something I can do, I will. That's optimism."

### Conclusion: The Multifaceted Dialogue

In the presentation above, I have underlined the need for a shift in focus within the research on inter-religious dialogue. The view of dialogue as a purely intellectual process of making the religious other intelligible should be complemented by an understanding of the ethical, essentially human demands such encounters place on us. Thus, my aim has been to show the inadequacy of the traditional approach and instead provide an integrated, dialogical approach to religious difference as an alternative position within the frameworks of the Abrahamic traditions. In accord with Pfändtner, I regard dialogue as a creative and dynamic activity that brings about understanding, though not necessarily agreement (Pfändtner 2005, 21). What I call for, consequently, is a perspective on dialogue that acknowledges the structuring power of tradition, theology, and text, but is simultaneously open to the individual and her interpretation of the inter-religious situation. In my opinion, dialogue is doing – it is an activity carried out by human beings who embody thoughts and feelings, interpretations and memories, traditions and emotions in their different and creative ways of dialoguing.

The views of writers Susanne Levin and Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt exemplify this theoretical discussion in an apt way. Both of them portray dialogue as a multifaceted process of intellectual reflection, emotional experiences, and concrete action. As artists engaged in inter-religious dialogue, they both underscore the power of art in general, and literature in particular, to function as creative and constructive tools in the encounter between persons of different faiths. For Levin, literature fills this function mainly by awaking empathy for the religious other. For Schmitt, the vital contribution of literature to inter-religious dialogue lies in its ability to present a complex image of reality in which incongruity and contradiction is allowed. The authors thereby answer the questions posed in the beginning of this article in the affirmative: fictitious stories can build bridges of understanding, promote respect and offer new openings in the inter-religious encounter. Furthermore, the ways in which they discuss religion and art exemplify the fundamental nature of inter-religious dialogue as a creative, complex, intrinsically human and dynamic activity.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The following analysis is based on interviews conducted by the author, with Levin in May 2008 and with Schmitt in June 2008. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed into text documents. All quotations in the text refer to these transcripts, which are stored at Åbo Akademi University (see reference list for details). The interview with Schmitt was conducted in English, but the interview with Levin was conducted in Swedish. The author has translated Levin's quotations.

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## Gideon and Baal: A Test Case for Interfaith Dialogue

By Richard D. Nelson

### Abstract

The practice of Scriptural Reasoning (SR) provides a unique resource for interfaith dialogue. This process brings together Muslims, Jews, and Christians to converse about their respective canonical texts (Qur'an, Tanakh, Bible). Treating the Christian Bible as a theater of conflicting values demonstrated by characters allows it to move beyond being a sectarian canon to become a focal point for negotiating religious and ethical diversity.

### Scriptural Reasoning

What role can canonical texts play in inter-religious dialogue? Many Christians expect the Bible to be the chief source and foundation of what they have to say in the public square. Muslims and Jews also treat their scriptures as normative documents. Yet the Christian Bible treated as a sectarian canon would seem an unhelpful resource for interfaith dialogue about public issues, more likely to induce resistance and hostility than to facilitate understanding. This question is especially critical given the increasing religious diversity of North America and Europe.<sup>1</sup>

During a recent stay in Cambridge, England, I encountered a lively movement called "scriptural reasoning." This process brings together Muslims, Jews, and Christians to converse about their canonical texts. Scriptural reasoning is the practice of gathering in a neutral site (or sites that rotate among the three faiths) to read sacred scriptures and use them as a basis to reason together about contemporary issues. Participants strive for an open, honest relationship with each other, while remaining committed to the truth of their own faith and scriptures. Because of the dangers posed by power imbalances among the three faiths in predominantly Christian countries, every effort is made to achieve equality in leadership and involvement. At present, scriptural reasoning flourishes predominantly in England and North America.<sup>2</sup>

Because I was studying the book of Judges when scriptural reasoning came to my attention, the story of Gideon and particularly Gideon's attack on the local altar to Baal (Judges 6:25-32) appealed to me as a test case. How might this story of religious conflict involving the destruction of a rival religion's sacred place work in an arena of interfaith dialogue around the question of interfaith relations?

### Scripture as a Theater of Values<sup>3</sup>

It is important, first of all, to approach scripture from a new angle within the context of interfaith dialogue. Most important is the distinction between its use in *prescriptive* and *descriptive* discourse. *Prescriptive* language urges and commands or discourages and forbids

action: “Love your neighbor. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” *Descriptive* discourse simply tells us how things were or are, without suggesting that we should imitate what we read about. Judges 11 describes human sacrifice, but does not command it. Judges 17 portrays idolatry, but does not encourage it.

Within the community of faith, the Bible encourages Christians to believe, tells them what and in whom to believe, and guides and motivates actions. In this sense, scripture is *prescriptive*. However, when using the Bible as but one of several canonical texts in public discussion, it is important to bracket off its prescriptive claims. Instead one needs to focus on the Bible as a text inherited from the past that is *descriptive* of human values and character. Some of what it describes is admirable, some is problematic.

Society needs a public theater in which it may rehearse and debate ideals and alternatives, and canons (either scriptural or literary) can provide such a theater. Scripture, when understood as descriptive rather than prescriptive, can provide a forum for debates about choices, conflicting values, and underlying principles. Biblical narratives about characters (in the literary sense) who exhibit character (in the moral sense of virtue or vice) can be a platform for public discussion. Biblical characters who are presented in any sort of depth tend to be entirely believable and completely human. Readers are invited to admire or despise them. There is usually enough ambiguity about a character’s situation and behavior to generate evaluations and responses that are mixed and complex.

Judges has great potential as a theater of values for public interfaith discussion. Careful reading exposes conflicting core values on every page. The book establishes a cyclical structure of historical events, but soon begins to undermine it. Evaluative summaries and editorials offer competing interpretations of events. Judges rule “all Israel,” but the stories themselves betray a parochial horizon. The main figures are both “deliverers” and “judges.” Patriarchy is asserted, but at the same time subverted. Kingship leads to tyranny, but Israel must have a king in order to avoid moral chaos. The virtues and vices of characters play a major role, alongside lively action, conflicting values, and the insistent viewpoint of the evaluative voice of the narrator. Judges is not prescriptive (except for its prohibition of apostate worship), but descriptive of the ways that its characters reveal their values and personal integrity. Values are negotiated concretely through the presentation of about a dozen major players along with numerous more minor, but highly interesting people. These characters are for the most part dubious and complex, displaying strengths, weaknesses and internal conflicts. In this way they create a theater or arena in which values may be negotiated and explored. Jephthah or Samson may be disappointing for the moralist and infuriating for the feminist, but both make for great theater!

### Judges 6:25-32: Religious Commitment Versus Open-Mindedness.

The value negotiated most obviously in the Gideon story (Judges 6 – 8) is that of Israel’s commitment to Yahweh as its exclusive God. Ostensibly, this value sounds sectarian, rather than a basis for interfaith dialogue. Yet as theater, it is offered up for readers’ consideration, not forced upon them by an authoritarian claim of revealed truth. Moreover, the text itself presents a subtle

counterargument to religious fanaticism or fundamentalist extremism, embodied in the character of Gideon's father Joash.

The Gideon story, like those of the other judges, is set into a cyclical framework of sin, punishment, Israel's cry, and God's provision of a deliverer (Judg. 6:1-6). Yet instead of immediately sending a deliverer in response to Israel's cry (as in Judg. 3:9, 15; 4:4), God sends a prophet (Judg. 6:7-8) who announces, "I am the Lord your God; you shall not pay reverence to the gods of the Amorites. . . . But you have not given heed to my voice (Judg. 6:10, NRSV)." Clearly Israel's "cry" (Judg. 6:6) does not mean they have repented or turned back to God. They have simply cried out "on account of the Midianites (Judg. 6:7)."

Yet God has not given up on Israel. As a dramatic character, God remains personally involved. The first person singular is repeated: "I led . . . I delivered . . . I said . . . I am Yahweh (Judg. 6:8-10)." By calling Gideon rather than simply leaving Israel to its fate, God reveals a desire to be in relationship with Israel.

God is willing to stay committed to Israel, but continues to expect commitment and loyalty on its part. Baal worship in Gideon's hometown of Ophrah proves the reality of the prophet's accusation. Thus, before any army is mustered or battle joined, God commands Gideon to "pull down the altar of Baal that belongs to your father (Judg. 6:25)." In the service of religious exclusivity, Gideon must go against his hometown and radically violate the core social value of loyalty to family. What follows illustrates both Gideon's (somewhat reluctant) zeal and a militant commitment to Baal on the part of the citizens of Ophrah. Values collide.

A repetition of the word "night" forms a bracket around Gideon's deed (Judg. 6:25-27). "By night" illustrates Gideon's fear and lack of conviction. In contrast, the townspeople rise "early in the morning" as a sign of determination and enthusiastic action (Judg. 6:28). Their perception of the state of the altar corresponds exactly with God's command (cf. Judg. 6:28; Judg. 6:25-26). This repetition underscores the impact this shocking sight has on them. The wording of their question, "Who has done this thing?" is repeated precisely in the answer, "Gideon son of Joash did this thing (Judg. 6:29)." The reader is invited to conclude that Baal is powerless, for the new altar of Yahweh stands right on top of Baal's destroyed one, and the wood of the sacred pole has proven to be simply firewood (cf. 2 Kings 19:18 and Isaiah 44:19). Opposing religious commitments lead to a clandestine, destructive raid on the installations of a rival faith and a call for the death of one who has insulted the 'true religion.' This sounds very contemporary.

But zealous religious commitment is not the only value on stage in this theater. Consider Gideon's father Joash, who manages to preserve peace with a shrewd and wonderfully ambiguous answer that both saves his son and permits him to acknowledge his own faith in Baal (Judg. 6:31). He says, in effect, "let the gods sort out their own problems." Joash both affirms Baal and brilliantly insinuates that the fanaticism of Baal's devotees actually questions Baal's power in a way that might warrant their deaths. He acknowledges that this is a serious situation for Baal and that Baal's godhood depends on whether Baal acts or not. Joash claims that true faith in Baal actually necessitates the inaction of his worshippers.

Joash has his say, but of course the value of Israel's exclusive commitment to Yahweh remains dominant. In passing, Joash lets slip that Baal's powerlessness has already been demonstrated, for "his altar has been pulled down (Judg. 6:31)." Nevertheless, two values are at odds: "Pull down the altar of Baal" versus "If [Baal] is a god, let him contend for himself."

What might using this wonderfully conflicted text as a springboard for interfaith discussion lead to? Nothing very comfortable, I suspect! Is true faith compatible with a genuine appreciation for other religions? Should the historical success of a religion really be considered as evidence for its truth? Can the struggle to advance one's religion actually be considered a lack of confidence in the power of one's God? What stance ought adherents of each religion take concerning their own faith's history of destroying the temples, mosques, churches, and synagogues of other religions? Is government sponsorship of one faith over another (established churches, *sharia*, rabbinic courts) healthy and helpful?

What "scriptural reasoning" on this text might lead to is not really the point. However, a willingness to utilize the Bible as a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, theater of values that are in conflict and under negotiation may turn out to be one way that church leaders can engage in productive interfaith conversation.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On the value of the Christian Old Testament as a resource for dialogue about public issues, see Richard D. Nelson, “The Old Testament and Public Theology,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 36 (2009): 85-94.

<sup>2</sup> Further background is available in Jeffrey W. Bailey, “Sacred Book Club: Reading Scripture across Interfaith Lines,” *Christian Century* 123 no. 18 (Sept. 5, 2006), 36-42, at [www.scripturalreasoning.org.uk](http://www.scripturalreasoning.org.uk), and from *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning*, which has been published online since 2001 (<http://etext.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/>).

<sup>3</sup> I derive the notion of canon as a theater of conflicting values exhibited by character in part from Charles Altieri, “An Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon,” *Critical Inquiry* 10 (1983): 37-60. See also William Schwieker, “Images of Scripture and Contemporary Theological Ethics,” in William P. Brown. *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 34-52.

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## **Voices of Hindutva: Creating and Exploiting Religious Binaries**

By Sameer Malik

### *Editors' Note*

*This article is being published under a pseudonym, as the author fears that he would otherwise risk physical injury. Though as a general policy the Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue™ discourages the use of pseudonyms as a potential hindrance to open and direct dialogue, it has made an exception due to the special circumstances of the author and the desire to broaden the scope of dialogue to include more challenging topics to discuss.*

### **Abstract**

In 2002, Gujarat, India experienced a traumatizing episode of communal violence in which Muslims, a religious minority, were actively targeted. It is widely believed that the state government, run and influenced by extreme Hindu Nationalist (Hindutva) groups, is at least partly responsible for this. Although the extent of their logistical involvement is debated, the rhetoric of many Hindutva organizations creates and demonizes a religious other. In contrast to the majority of Hindus and the majority of Indians, leaders of a number of Hindutva elements use language that creates pervasive religious binaries, which are instrumental in the recurrence of violence. The political success of Hindutva groups in Gujarat therefore complicates peace-building efforts, as illustrated by the dynamics of responses by local non-governmental organizations (NGO's) to the violence.

On February 27, 2002, a train carrying Hindutva volunteers caught fire in the town of Godhra, killing 55-60 pilgrims inside one coach. Although various reasons have been cited, including arson by a Muslim mob, the cause of the fire is still debated. The very next day, communal riots erupted in the city of Ahmedabad and in some villages around the state. The United States Government estimates that by the end of the period of rioting, 2,000 people were killed and 100,000 were displaced and moved to relief camps ("International Religious Freedom"). Humanitarian organizations claim that up to 2,500 were killed and 140,000 were displaced (Parker 2008). These riots have been called "pogroms" by professionals from various fields, including scholars such as Steven Wilkinson (2005, 3) and Paul Brass (2003, 390), because of the highly disproportionate number of Muslim casualties.

Allegations of governmental involvement are directed at the Sangh Parivar, a closely linked family of organizations that promotes an extreme Hindu nationalist ideology called Hindutva. Through its many branches, including the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), and the Bajrang Dal, Hindutva ideology plays a significant role in arenas as diverse as politics, education, youth organization, social mobilization, and even paramilitary training. However, it is crucial to distinguish between Hindutva and Hindu, because only a minority of Hindus and a minority of Indians support the ideology itself. This piece is not intended as a polemic against Hindus, the vast majority of whom embrace peaceful and tolerant belief systems. Rather, it uses the 2002 Gujarat Riots as a case study to show how a well-organized group can

systematically wield rhetoric and political power to establish a religious “other” and call for violence.

Few dispute that Hindu-Muslim riots yield tangible political gains for these Sangh Parivar organizations (Brass 2003, 6). Their repeated democratic election, both in and beyond Gujarat, may be construed as evidence of the effectiveness of their incendiary rhetoric. But the link between their rhetoric and recurring communal violence has yet to be widely appreciated.

Notwithstanding their exact level of involvement in the 2002 Riots, which is still being examined and debated, the messages put forth by Hindutva leaders exaggerate two binaries: Hinduism versus Islam, and Hindus versus Muslims. This paper seeks to demonstrate that these reified categories are then exploited to issue calls for inter-religious violence.

The first binary reified by Hindutva organizations is that of Hinduism versus Islam. In an interview, the notorious VHP leader, Praveen Togadia, described Islam as having an “exclusively totalitarian system (“We, Hindus and...”).” With help from madrasas in spreading its fundamentalist ideologies, Islam encourages violent jihad and the killing of non-Muslims. In contrast, Togadia proclaims that “Hinduism is synonymous with harmony (*Ibid*).” After creating this binary, he calls Islam’s intolerant ideologies the root of the problem (*Ibid*). Praveen Togadia, having since been accused of participating in the riots himself, is a high ranking official in the VHP, which the U.S. State Department cites as an “extremist” organization that has instigated violence (Swami, “International Religious Freedom,” Rajghatta).

Other Sangh Parivar organizations employ very similar rhetoric. Consider the Bajrang Dal, the Hindutva ideology’s youth wing. It provocatively declares that Islam’s mission is to convert and conquer all of India (“About Us”). Prahlad Shastri, a charismatic orator in the Bajrang Dal, even declared in a public speech that although not all Muslims are terrorists “every terrorist in the world is a Muslim (2008).” The markedly Hindu audience for his speech, including young children, was told that terrorism is endemic to Islam. The implications of such rhetoric are particularly incendiary because the state government attributed the Godhra train fire to a Muslim mob. Here, the juxtaposition of the two religious groups is taken one step farther: If the religious ideologies are fundamentally different, in that Islam is intolerant while Hinduism is harmonious, then the individuals ascribing to these ideologies are also fundamentally different from one another.

Thus, in addition to the binary between Hinduism and Islam, Hindutva rhetoric also presents a binary between Hindu and Muslim. In this same speech, Prahlad Shastri goes on to say that the political elections are not actually between BJP and Indian National Congress (INC), but Hindus and Muslims. Although this simplistic description seems unfair, it is mild in comparison to the position of Shastri’s umbrella organization, the Bajrang Dal, which contends that all Muslims should “go back to Pakistan and Bangladesh” (as if that is where they came from!), and that Muslims should not be allowed hold political seats in India (Bajrang Dal 2008). In another speech, Acharya Dharmendra, a leader in the VHP, even compares Muslims to a disease, a headache, and a problem that is threatening to divide the Hindu nation once again (2008).

In both binaries created by Hindutva's divisive rhetoric, Hinduism and Hindus are shown to be the opposite of Islam and Muslims, and therefore superior. Hinduism promotes harmony, not intolerance. Peace, not endemic terrorism. India, not Pakistan or Bangladesh. And perhaps most instructive as to the original motive for creating the binaries: BJP, not INC. This final contrast in itself can inspire volumes of analysis, and is a topic to which justice cannot be done here. These rigid binaries, once formed, can then be exploited to incite violence, yielding likely political gains for Hindutva organizations (Brass 2003, 6). The justification for such violence takes two forms in Hindutva rhetoric: blame displacement and fear mongering.

Blame displacement is simply a way of declaring "They started it!" This strategy of justifying violence has been exemplified by multiple individuals who espouse Hindutva ideology. One example is that of Chief Minister of Gujarat Narendra Modi, who is affiliated with both the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Modi's response to the massacre in Gujarat was to say, "Every action has an equal and opposite reaction," implying that violence was to be expected after the Godhra train fire (Wilkinson 2005, 392). By displacing blame for the violence onto Muslims, who were in fact overwhelmingly the victims of the riots, Modi all but vindicates the perpetrators of such heinous crimes and equates the death of 55-60 to that of 2000-2500 victims.

This phenomenon of justifying violence by displacing blame is very common. Paul Brass says that in times of conflict, all participating sides justify themselves by claiming only to act in retaliation, using the terms "retaliation" and "self-defense" interchangeably. In his discussion of Hindu-Muslim violence in contemporary India, Brass puts great emphasis on proving false the distinction between aggression and self-defense (2003, 356). Such a distinction, if not completely false, is at least greatly exaggerated. This is a very disingenuous maneuver, which serves to endorse reactionary violence. Alongside blame displacement, Hindutva organizations also justify violence by fear-mongering and threat exaggeration.

Mechanisms for justifying violence through fear appear to proceed sequentially. First, the Hindutva leadership reopens wounds from different historical eras, all the way from "Mohammedan rule" up to the era of British imperialism and colonialism. Then, citing these historical events and their injustices as evidence, they construct elaborate conspiracy theories for the present. These theories implicate not only established foreign polities, but also many foreign religious entities, all of whom are described as helping Indian Muslims to threaten the security of the *Bharat*, or the Indian Nation. Once these exaggerated threats are topped off with a sense of urgency and imminence, a call to violence is the next and final step.

Praveen Togadia, for example, claims that during "the Mohammedan rule", thirty thousand temples were converted into mosques (The Milli Gazette 2008). The Bajrang Dal describes this era as a time of "barbaric" Mogul rule, a time when the Hindu nation had been enslaved but was ultimately freed (Bajrang Dal 2008). Acharya Dharmendra also references this history in the same speech mentioned above, and even makes a smooth connection to the present day, declaring that "Christian and Islamic imperialism have become one." This statement is very succinct yet powerful. It peels at the scabs of history and implies that not only do Christian and Islamic imperialism still exist, but that they have now joined forces. Dharmendra even goes so far

as to claim that foreign imperialism is visible in the actions of prominent politician Sonia Gandhi, whom he presents as a pawn of the Pope seeking to “Christianize and Islamize India.” He emphasizes that Muslims have 28 countries in this world and Christians have over 200, then subsequently leaves his audience feeling helpless by asking, and leaving unanswered, two questions: “Which is your nation? Where will you go?”

Among the different threats that face the Hindu nation, according to Hindutva leaders, Pakistan plays an exceptionally prominent role. Togadia believes the VHP’s responsibility is to expose Pakistan, Pakistani intelligence agencies, and their “grand design” to destabilize India. This is how the VHP can defend Vedic culture from totalitarianism and violence, according to Togadia. But Vedic culture, he claims in a videotaped speech, cannot be defended, nor can terrorism be eliminated, while Hindus still kneel before Muslims (see also The Milli Gazette 2008). Togadia’s conspiracy theory implicates the Taliban alongside Pakistan and Pakistani intelligence agencies. But it does not end there – the Bajrang Dal even implicates the United States as a threat, citing American involvement in Kosovo, Bosnia, Timor, and Chechnya as historical evidence (Bajrang Dal 2008).

Aside from political and imperialistic threats, religious threats are also exaggerated. In 1981, a community of untouchable-caste Hindus from Meenakshipuram, a village in Tamil Nadu, converted *en masse* to Islam. Hindutva organizations often accuse wealthy pan-Islamists from the Middle East of sponsoring this conversion, suggesting that “petro-dollars” were given as bribes to those who converted. And even though evidence suggests otherwise, this event was construed as a Muslim conspiracy and an Islamic threat to Hindu values, culture, and unity. This event has since attained a mythical status, and is cited repeatedly by Hindutva organizations as evidence for a conspiracy against the Hindu nation (Van der Veer 1994, 26, 113).

Although vaguely rooted in history, much of the rhetoric that comes from Hindutva leaders is profoundly exaggerated. These embellishments are carefully echoed over and over again by Sangh Parivar organizations to different segments of society. Muslims and Islam are fundamentally different from Hindus and Hinduism. The Hindu nation, having previously experienced Mogul and British imperialism, is once again being threatened by Islamic imperialism. But this time around, the state of Pakistan, the Pope, Sonia Gandhi, the Taliban, the United States, and Middle-Eastern special interests all share a motive with Muslims. They are all trying to subvert the Hindu nation and Vedic culture, whether through politics or religion. Such sweeping declarations from Hindutva organizations offer not just simple commentary, but together form a holistic worldview.

With such a frightening worldview, taking violent action in “retaliation” is no longer quite so implausible. Especially provocative statements come from those whose rhetoric we have already seen. Acharya Dharmendra delivered a speech in front of a life-sized illustration of the burning S/6 train compartment, clearly depicting the Godhra train fire, and creating a very emotionally charged moment. In the presence of political leaders, the police, and many others, Dharmendra asked his audience if Pakistan is their friend or enemy. He received a resounding response of “Enemy!” and continues:

“Till Pakistan is reduced to rubble (literally, ‘*khaak-istan*’), Gujarat and Mother India can not rest in peace. It is simple – we have to root out the enemy and we must start from right here. The whole country will follow your example!”

Such an unequivocal call for aggression can also be found in speeches by other Hindutva organizers. Praveen Togadia explains to his audience that the Godhra train fire happened because the country follows Mahatma Gandhi’s values. If they continue Gandhi’s policies of nonviolence, he says, the terrorism will continue. “Brothers – we have to abandon Gandhi,” urged Togadia, and received a modest round of applause from the audience.

Vinay Katiyar, head of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh and first President of the Bajrang Dal (Frontline 2002), is another key public figure who employs strong, warlike language. In an interview, Katiyar claims ownership for various controversial lands within India. He subsequently extends these claims to lands outside of India, and provocatively declares that even Mecca and Medina, the most sacred places in Islam, are “our places.” The war is very old and continues to this day, insists Katiyar in an interview found in the 2006 documentary, “The Making of a Muslim Terrorist.” Furthermore, at the end of this war, the “Vedic Sanathan Dharma” and Hindu society will be established – not only in India, but throughout the world.

The messages that come from Hindutva leadership clearly come across as divisive and incendiary. The language used by the Hindu Nationalist organizations creates strong and vastly exaggerated binaries of Hindu versus Muslim and Hinduism versus Islam. These binaries are subsequently used to justify and even call for communal violence, and are instrumental to its recurrence. Such crimes serve the political interests of the Hindutva movement at the expense of the Congress Party establishment and countless innocent citizens. And although the “other” is always demonized in a conflict situation, the apparent involvement of the regional government in Gujarat severely complicates the situation, especially for justice, reconciliation, or peace-building efforts.

In September 2003, a year and a half after the riots, the Supreme Court of India publicly said that they had lost faith in the Government of Gujarat. Then in 2004, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India went so far as to describe Narendra Modi, the Chief Minister of Gujarat, as a modern-day Nero who looked the other way during the riots (Tribune News Service 2007). Even today, faith in the Gujarat judicial system is nearly absent. Operating within this framework of stagnation and continued government indifference, many NGOs in Gujarat have given up the pursuit of justice for the victims and have settled for reconciliation. Even so, the question of how to pursue reconciliation remains daunting.

Non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) in Gujarat face a litany of obstacles in their peace-building and violence-prevention efforts. In a place where governmental organizations may actually contribute to inter-religious strife, where does reconciliation begin? Experts on the matter generally agree that it has been nearly impossible to make progress through dialogue with Hindutva factions. Fr. Cedric Prakash, an internationally acclaimed human rights activist in Gujarat, describes the situation:

For any serious dialogue, there has to be a level playing field, and the partners to the dialogue have to be sincere about it, which the Sangh Parivar is clearly not.

Their whole agenda and worldview is based on hatred for and exclusion of non-Hindus, so how can you expect them to be sincere about dialogue (Sikand 2005)?

Pleas from human rights organizations have fallen on deaf ears, and attempts at such dialogue have indeed proven fruitless. As a result, some have tried to shift from dialogue with the government to dialoguing among the citizens.

Yet even those who engage in citizens' dialogue must concede its limited effectiveness. In most conflict situations, there are more people who do not fight than those who do so, and more people who reject hatred than those who perpetuate it (Anderson 1999, 24). Where a majority of citizens prefer peace over violence, but the latter is perpetuated by a select group that wields disproportionate power, the effectiveness of grassroots dialogue is limited. Unless such discourse can change the existing political structure, its effectiveness will remain fragile, and may be shattered in an instant by those in office.

Historically, Hindutva elements have gained power whenever there has been interreligious violence in India by exacerbating and exploiting religious divisions for political gain, and by playing identity groups against each other. This is most visible in the context of the 2002 riots. Although religion may be heavily implicated, it is not at the very core of today's conflicts in Gujarat in the way political dynamics are. Since the BJP shares many positions with its rival, the INC, they differentiate themselves primarily through their nationalist ideology (Overdorf 2008). The BJP has branded itself as an alternative to the ineffective, slow, and "soft" INC, and as a party that will secure national and state identities.

Recognizing this intricate relationship between politics and violence, many peace-oriented NGO's in Gujarat have been forced to develop political opinions. Even though they may pursue their own separate avenues towards peace, such as citizens' dialogue or education, they maintain political stances, even if unofficial. Prashant, for example, is human rights advocacy group based in Ahmedabad. Recognizing that fighting for human rights in the context of Gujarat necessitates being vociferously political, Prashant and its founder Fr. Cedric Prakash have consistently been outspoken critics of Hindutva. As a result, Fr. Cedric and many other like-minded individuals have received threats against their lives from people they identify as "government thugs." In light of this, it is not surprising that very few individuals or organizations have challenged outright the rhetoric used by the Hindutva movement.

The events of 2002 were a tragic demonstration of the convergence of politics, jingoism, and religious extremism in Hindutva ideology. To effect positive change, all three must be addressed. Avoiding politics when elected officials actively perpetuate hatred and violence is counterproductive. Failing to address nationalist ideology when it is used to create a religious other simply encourages communal isolation. And not changing a discourse that exploits religion as an instrument to divide reinforces the exclusive binaries. Peace-building NGO's in Gujarat struggle with the complexity of their task on a daily basis, and a cohesive and effective response to Hindutva ideology at such a level has yet to be found. Perhaps one solution lies in government

itself, in the rebranding and revival of the Indian National Congress, or even in the introduction of a third major political coalition.

There really is no debate – much less dialogue – possible regarding the binary-forming propaganda utilized by Hindutva elements. Gujarat, the state which once incubated Gandhi's principle of *ahimsa* (active non-violence), has now become a breeding ground for the extreme Hindutva movement. Until Gujarat and India at large shed identity-based politics in favor of issue-based politics, and until the language and actions of the Hindutva movement either reduce in volume or change in tone, lasting reconciliation along communal lines will remain elusive. In 1948, a member of the nascent Hindutva movement assassinated Gandhi, and even today, Hindutva continues to undermine the vision of a peaceful India.

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## A Rabbi, The Jewish Theological Seminary, and Jewish-Muslim Engagement: A Field Report

By Burton L. Visotzky

### Abstract

For the past four years, I have been representing the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in a variety of dialogue and social action projects with the Muslim community in the U.S. and abroad. These engagements have been conducted on the local, national, and international levels. This essay surveys those efforts and offers some brief assessment of preliminary outcomes. The essay is a personal view, as I have been involved as a participant in every program described here, up to the time of this writing (Dec. 31, 2008).<sup>1</sup> But the personal is necessary in the development of genuine interfaith relationships.

### Article

In November, 2004, JTS was invited by Dr. Stephen P. Cohen, director of the Institute for Middle East Peace and Development, to host a session of his “Summit for Interfaith Respect,” a program he ran in conjunction with the United State’s Department of State’s International Visitor Leadership Program. The session took place at JTS, first in the synagogue, and then over lunch. In the synagogue, our visitors were greeted by JTS Vice-Chancellor Rabbi William Lebeau, and I taught a session on “The Binding of Abraham’s Son in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Traditions.” The program was attended by American Jewish and Christian clergy, but notably incorporated Muslim leadership from Jordan and Egypt. The Jordanians included Sheikh Izeddin al-Tamimi, Chief Justice of the Islamic (*Shari`a*) Supreme Court, and Imam Hamdi Murad, *Waqf* minister and assistant secretary-general of the World Muslim Congress. The Egyptian delegation included the Sheikh of Al Azhar University in Cairo, Mohammad Seyyed al-Tantawi, and the president of Al Azhar, former Grand Mufti of Egypt, Ahmed al-Tayyeb. They were accompanied by Egypt’s Assistant Foreign Minister, Dr. Sallama Shaker. At the end of my teaching session, I invited all present to come up and see an open Torah scroll, as we discussed commonalities and differences among the peoples of the Book.

Over the kosher (*halaal*) lunch, Dr. Shaker and I discovered that each of us had a child who attended Oberlin College. Of such bonds, interreligious dialogue is made. Coincidentally, in December, 2004, I vacationed with my family in Cairo. Dr. Shaker graciously hosted us at a luncheon, which included visits from Egyptian cabinet ministers and a welcome telephone call from Dr. al-Tayyeb. This luncheon advanced my entrée into the Muslim world, leading to my invitation to Doha, Qatar in June, 2005.

In 2003, the Emir of Qatar, Shaikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, invited representatives from the Anglican community to engage in Christian-Muslim dialogue in Doha. In the second

year of this dialogue, the Emir invited representatives from the Vatican. For year three of the Qatari interreligious dialogue, 2005, the Emir included Jews. He did this against the protest of local radical Muslim clerics. I was part of a delegation of four American Rabbis and one French Jew. The Arab television and print media covered our attendance extensively. In Doha, we had to revise some naively held preconceptions about our interlocutors. First, a significant proportion of the Christians in the dialogue were Arab Christians, not Europeans. Second, the dialogue was co-sponsored by the University in Qatar and so was led by the chair of the Department of *Shari'a*. Fully covered in *hijab* (except for face and hands), she ran the conference with brisk authority.

There was a fifth member of the American delegation to Doha, Islamic scholar and jurist Dr. Muzammil al-Saddiqi, chairman of the *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) Council of North America. In July 2005, just after the Doha conference, the *Fiqh* Council issued a *fatwa* (Islamic legal opinion) against all forms of terrorism. This was just one of the fruits of the inter-religious cooperation which the Qatar conference engendered. Subsequent inter-religious conferences in Qatar, from 2006 onward, have also had Israelis in attendance. As will be explained, Israel plays a significant role in international interfaith endeavors.

September is always a busy month for the international community, when they all gather in New York for the U.N. General Assembly. In September 2005, King Abdullah of Jordan spoke at the Riverside (Protestant) Church, in upper Manhattan. At his request, faculty and students of JTS were invited to attend, making the evening a Muslim, Christian, and Jewish inter-religious event. Later that month, again under the aegis of the State Department's International Visitor Leadership Program, JTS hosted a group of Imams from Kuwait. That same week, Rabbi Jose Rolando Matalon and I dined with the Qatari Assistant Foreign Minister to help him plan the 2006 interfaith conference in Doha. Rabbi Matalon has since joined the Doha planning committee.

I also went to Washington, D.C. in September 2005, to meet with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and then Foreign Affairs Minister, Nasser al Qudwa. The discussion took place before Hamas was elected or took over in Gaza. This was a very frustrating meeting, as the Palestinian delegation was unwilling even to admit aloud that there had been a Jewish historic presence in Jerusalem before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While I understand the politics involved in such a hard-line stance, it did not engender openness or good faith. It also brought home to me the extent to which international inter-religious work is also a form of second-tier diplomacy, advancing both U.S. and Israeli interests.

In September 2006, this observation was underscored when a group of Saudi Arabian Imams visited JTS under the auspices of the U.S. State Department. As has become the custom, we began in the synagogue, moved to the library (where I proudly showed off the Arabic language section), and then to a conference room to play, "Ask the Rabbi." The State Department interpreter had to intervene at one point to explain to me that when I told them I was a Zionist, what they heard me saying was, "I am proud to condone the oppression of the Palestinians." I clarified that I personally (not speaking for JTS or anyone but myself) supported a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and thought that King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia's proposals, along with those of the Quartet, could serve as a basis for such a solution. When I

redefined Zionism as the right to a Jewish homeland in its historic setting, there was a palpable sense of relief – we had found a definition of Zionism that was apparently acceptable within the purview of Saudi politics.<sup>2</sup>

In fall 2007, I had the opportunity to engage in local Jewish-Muslim dialogue. I was invited to an *Iftar* dinner, marking the end of the daily fast in the sacred month of Ramadan. The dinner was hosted by Union Theological Seminary, again making it a truly Muslim-Christian-Jewish inter-religious event. There, I had the honor of sitting next to Debbie Almontaser, founder of New York's Khalil Gibran International Academy (KGIA). At the time, she was embroiled in a controversy stoked by right-wing anti-Islamic elements in the New York community. At their urging, certain local media beat a drum of opposition against her appointment to head KGIA, a public school, despite Debbie Almontaser's distinguished career as a New York educator and an active dialoguer with the Jewish community. I was proud to share the podium with her and stated my personal opinion that she should be reinstated as head of the school. I have since had the pleasure of greeting Debbie in the synagogue where I pray, and I regret that she has not regained her leadership role in KGIA.

In October 2007, I dialogued with Muslim feminist activist Asra Nomani at a Washington, D.C. Conservative synagogue. She is a former Wall Street Journal reporter who was a close friend of the late Daniel Pearl. Pearl had been gruesomely murdered by Muslim extremists, and Nomani spoke movingly about his mission and her work to bring the circumstances of his terrible death to light. Nomani was very well received by the overwhelmingly Jewish audience, many of whom had never been in contact with a member of the Muslim community. While this is a very positive development, Nomani hardly represents mainstream American Islam, given her feminist militancy. Still, she has been instrumental in helping Islam in the U.S. move towards its own self-definition, which includes active leadership roles for women.

In 2007, I also responded to JTS Chancellor Arnold Eisen's request that I open relations with a local New York Mosque. Since Dr. Eisen sits on the advisory board of the Tanenbaum Center for Inter-religious Understanding, he recommended that I contact his colleague Shamsi Ali, who serves as the Imam of the Islamic Cultural Center of New York (ICC). The ICC is located in one of the most beautiful sanctuaries in New York City, the 96<sup>th</sup> Street Mosque. In the initial six months of meetings with Imam Shamsi and his Muslim community members, we held repeated small group dialogues, culminating in an invitation to Imam Shamsi to speak during a prayer service in the Synagogue of the Jewish Theological Seminary (March 2008). He reciprocated by inviting me to speak at the Friday (*Jumaah*) prayers at the ICC (April 2008). Moving beyond dialogue, during the summer of 2008 we ran pilot programs, and now have a monthly joint social-action program in which members of the ICC join with the JTS community to volunteer working side-by-side at Broadway Community, Inc., a soup-kitchen housed in the Broadway Presbyterian Church. That program has proven such a success that we are expanding Jewish-Muslim service projects to other areas. The JTS Director of Community Outreach, Tani Schwartz, has provided thoughtful and energetic leadership in furthering this important web of relationships with the members of the ICC.

In February 2008, Imam Shamsi Ali brought the leadership of Indonesian Islam to visit JTS: Dr. Hasyim Muzadi, head of Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama, and Dr. M. Din Syamsuddin, head of Indonesia's Muhammadiyah. These two organizations count combined membership of between 70-80 million Muslims. Indonesia has the largest population of Muslims of any country in the world.

Later that month, Chancellor Arnold Eisen and I (along with Rabbi Stuart Altshuler, of Mission Viejo, California) met in Washington, D.C. with the leadership of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). Over a getting-to-know-you lunch with ISNA's interfaith director, Dr. Sayyid Syeed, and their director of communications, Mohammed Elsanousi, we agreed to embark on an ambitious three-part program. First, we agreed to join with ISNA in trying to match ten Conservative synagogues with ten North American mosques to further local inter-religious dialogue. JTS has undertaken this initiative with the Rabbinical Assembly, the organization of Conservative rabbis, and the National Council of Synagogues, a joint inter-religious-activities arm of the Conservative and Reform movements. Rabbi Gilbert Rosenthal, director of the latter organization, successfully recruited thirteen Conservative synagogues to be part of what ISNA calls their 10/10 effort. ISNA runs a similar program under the auspices of Reform Judaism.

To further raise awareness of Muslim-Jewish dialogue and social-action programming, I next undertook to survey the approximately 1,200 rabbis of the Conservative movement on their commitment to dialogue and Muslim-Jewish programming. Under the joint banner of the Jewish Theological Seminary and the National Council of Synagogues, we sent a short online survey to the membership of the Rabbinical Assembly in October and November 2008. We were delighted to receive three-dozen positive replies describing Jewish-Muslim interfaith contacts, large and small. Since I am aware of at least another dozen synagogues engaged in such programming, I feel confident that there are fifty or more Conservative synagogues involved with local Mosques.

Our third effort is in the active planning stages. It envisions an academic conference on "Judaism and Islam in North America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." JTS and ISNA plan to partner with Hartford Seminary. Hartford houses the Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations. The director of the Center, Professor Ingrid Mattson, currently serves as president of ISNA. Now in the planning and fundraising stages, we anticipate that the conference, which will have both academic and public sessions, will take place in late-spring or early-summer 2010. Yehezkel Landau, an associate in inter-religious relations on the Hartford faculty, who specializes in Jewish-Muslim dialogue, has assisted us in the planning process.

Shortly after establishing a relationship with ISNA's director of communications, Mohammed Elsanousi and I served together on a panel in April 2008, at the University of Florida at Gainesville. We traveled there to combat an effort by right-wing Jews and their political allies to demonize all Muslims as "Islam-fascists." Our presence, along with that of other religious leaders, helped lower the temperature between Muslims and Jews on that campus. I had served on a comparable panel with other religious and academic leaders at Columbia University during October 2007, when a similarly despicable "Islam-fascist Awareness Week" required a reasoned response.

In July 2008, I traveled to Madrid, Spain, at the invitation of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. King Abdullah sponsored the first ever Saudi inter-religious conference, hosted by King Juan Carlos of Spain. This event marks a watershed in Saudi Arabian Islam. Since the Saudi kingdom began, it has been intimately associated with Wahabi Islam. Formerly they had exported a version of Islam that required exclusive adherence to their vision. Earlier in the summer, the Saudis hosted an intra-Islamic conference in Mecca, to set ground rules for this far-reaching inter-religious dialogue. In Madrid, representatives from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam met with leaders of many other world religions. In Madrid I also had the opportunity to perform interviews for Saudi television. I was delighted that a positive interview with a rabbi was made available to the broad Saudi Arabian audience.

In the weeks immediately following the historic Madrid conclave, I traveled to New Haven, Connecticut, where the Yale Divinity School co-sponsored with Prince Ghazi of Jordan a Muslim-Christian conference on the inter-religious document, "A Common Word." That conference entailed a private workshop followed by public sessions. I spoke as the Jewish representative at the private workshop. Although my talk was entirely irenic, it was met with a tirade from Tayseer Rajab al Tamimi, head of the *Shari'a* court of Palestine. Before I could even respond to al Tamimi's political salvo, Prince Ghazi gently rebuked him for his diatribe. I was grateful to Prince Ghazi, and equally gratified to see in New Haven a number of Muslim dialogue leaders whom I had met previously. I name them here because I believe they are genuinely interested in advancing inter-religious relations: Grand Mufti of Bosnia, Dr. Mustafa Cerić; Dr. M. Din Syamsuddin, mentioned above as head of Indonesia's Muhammadiyah; Prince Bola Ajibola of Nigeria, former judge in the International Court of Justice at the Hague; and Dr. Sallama Shaker, Assistant Foreign Minister of Egypt.

In August 2008, I hosted at JTS a number of Turkish Imams under State Department's auspices. They were greeted by JTS Vice-Chancellor Rabbi Michael Greenbaum, and then we toured the synagogue and had a question and answer session. Over Labor Day weekend 2008, ISNA held its annual convention in Columbus, Ohio. The ISNA convention draws 30,000 Muslim attendees and in 2007 was addressed by the President of the Union for Reform Judaism, Rabbi Eric Yoffie. In 2008, JTS and Conservative Judaism were represented by our Columbus colleague, Rabbi Harold Berman, who has long involved his own congregation in Jewish-Muslim dialogue. I look forward to addressing the upcoming ISNA convention, scheduled for the July 4<sup>th</sup> Weekend 2009, in Washington, D.C.

In the same late summer months of 2008, I joined with Intersections International, a global initiative of the Collegiate Churches of New York. Intersections was working with the U.S.-Muslim Engagement Project to help build better relations between the U.S. and Islam, both internationally and locally. I served on the Advisory Board for the wonderful website: [www.ChangeTheStory.net](http://www.ChangeTheStory.net). The website is designed to help Americans and others see the broadest possible scope of Muslims, in order to combat stereotypes. The U.S.-Muslim Engagement Project (<http://www.usmuslimengagement.org/>) itself produced a very important policy study and set of recommendations, "Changing Course: A New Direction for U.S.

Relations with the Muslim World,” which one hopes can serve as a guide to the new U.S. administration.

Late September 2008 also brought us to Ramadan, when I was privileged to attend an *Iftar* dinner at Imam Shamsi Ali’s other mosque, in Jamaica, Queens. There we also lobbied New York City to make Muslim festivals part of the public school holiday calendar, along with Christian and Jewish holidays. If we are to engage in genuine inter-religious dialogue, we must insist that each partner in the dialogue receive the same rights in our broader community.

In November 2008, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia followed up on his pledge in Madrid and came to New York to address the U. N. on the importance of inter-religious cooperation. He invited Israeli President Shimon Peres and foreign minister Tzipi Livni to be present for the address. This recognition was a first for the Saudis, underscoring the seriousness of their commitment. The following evening, King Abdullah held a reception for inter-religious leaders. We spent nearly two hours with the King, hearing his views and engaging in lively dialogue. The Saudi shift is a significant change in world-view, on par with the Catholic Church’s adoption of “*Nostra Aetate*” during Vatican Two.

In December 2008, I was again in Washington, D. C. Kazakhstan’s ambassador to the U.S., Hon. Erlan Idrissov, gathered representatives of America’s various religious communities for dinner at the Kazakh Embassy (with the assistance of Intersections International). The dinner was attended by U. S. Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and other religious leaders in preparation for the Third Congress of Leaders of World Religions to take place in Astana, Kazakhstan during summer 2009. This Congress is held every three years. The first two congresses were notable in that they invited the chief rabbis of Israel as part of the Jewish delegation.

## Conclusion

This litany of Jewish-Muslim engagement represents a significant increase in dialogue efforts during the past four years. Locally, we have undertaken dialogue and social action projects between JTS and an important local Mosque. This has led to a successful building of relations between two communities that might otherwise be at odds with or ignore one another. It is deeply gratifying that members of the New York Muslim community are engaged in this project and seeking to expand opportunities for joint community service. Imam Shamsi Ali gets enormous credit for his tireless outreach efforts.

JTS has regularized these contacts so that it is becoming as commonplace for our students to engage in inter-religious programming with Muslims as it is with Christians. JTS is also offering a class in “Arabic for Hebrew Speakers.” I am participating in the class, testing my embarrassment threshold along with undergraduates and rabbinical students, as a demonstration of my growing commitment to Jewish-Muslim inter-religious engagement and my deep respect for Islamic sacred texts in their original language.

On the national level, ISNA is fulfilling its role as the largest umbrella organization of Muslims in North America. Under the leadership of President Ingrid Mattson and inter-religious activities director Dr. Sayyid Syeed, ISNA has reached out in an effort to “normalize” relations

between the Jewish and Muslim communities across the country. On both a national and international level this budding relationship has born fruit, as it was Dr. Syeed who made sure that there were appropriate Jewish representatives at the Saudi conference in Madrid. We are grateful to him and his colleagues at ISNA for their vision and fortitude in pursuing this important path. Jews and Muslims have a great deal to learn from one another about being “normalized” yet minority religions in the majority American Christian culture. We look forward to regularizing these contacts so that Jewish communities across the country will engage with the Muslim community in both dialogue and social-action programming.

Internationally, the picture is much more complex. In the past four years, JTS has engaged with religious representatives and leadership from Jordan, Egypt, Qatar, Kuwait, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Turkey, and Kazakhstan. I should state two obvious corollaries about these engagements. First, JTS is not a sovereign country. We are a small Jewish institution playing host to or participating in a much larger moment. It is a source of pride that we are one of the many Jewish organizations doing so. Second, for the most part the countries with which we are engaged in dialogue do not separate Church (Mosque) and State. This means that there will inevitably be a mixture of the political with the religious. This was amply demonstrated when, upon our arrival in Doha, among the first people to greet us were the U.S. ambassador to Qatar and Israel’s trade representative, who acts as their ambassador.

In each of the international meetings, JTS and I have been responding to overtures either from the U.S. State Department, or from Muslim governments, or particular participants. We have, then, always been the recipients of international contacts and have not actively initiated international engagement. In virtually every instance these relations have been affable, open minded, and in good faith; the sad exception being with the Palestinians. This latter problem reflects the terrible state of Israeli-Palestinian relations (Israel is engaged in hostilities with Hamas in Gaza, even as I write) and clouds prospects for significant progress in international inter-religious engagement. But, when American Jews do engage in such dialogue, we represent Israel to some degree.

I can only pray that JTS will continue to be invited to participate in international inter-religious dialogues. Ongoing engagement will allow us to move beyond what I would characterize as “first date” politesse, and carefully move on to embrace the hard issues of religious and political differences. This requires a commitment to long-term confidence-building and mutual respect. I look forward to Jews, Muslims, and Christians continuing inter-religious dialogue and doing good works together for the betterment of all humanity, *in-sha-Allah*.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I serve as the JTS liaison to the Muslim community. Other colleagues at JTS, such as Rabbi Daniel Nevins (Dean of the Rabbinical School), Rabbi Dr. Judith Hauptman (Chair of the Talmud Dept.), and Rabbi Dr. Alan Mittleman (Director of the Louis Finkelstein Institute for Religious and Social Studies), *inter alia*, are also engaged in Jewish-Muslim dialogue programs. I write here solely of my own experiences, individually and representing JTS.

<sup>2</sup> In spring, 2007, I served as Master Visiting Professor of Jewish Studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. As such, I was absent from Jewish-Muslim dialogue in the U.S. Even so, I had two Turkish Muslim students in my class at the Gregorian.

## **Revisiting Christian Soteriology in the Liberation Process of Korean Christianity: An Open Door for Inter-Religious Dialogue**

By Junehee Yoon

### **Abstract**

Christian faith is not about protecting the “doctrinal purity of Christian theology.” For Koreans, becoming Christian is taking part in the liberating mission of Jesus Christ for their own people in the Korea peninsula, in their own *Korean Christian* ways. For this reason, revisiting Christian soteriology will provide the foundation for Korean Christians to think rigorously about their Christian faith and ethnic identity. In doing so, a door of inter-religious dialogue can also be opened.

### **Introduction**

Because Christian theology is human speech about God, it is always related to concrete historical situations. To put it another way, theology is inseparable from social existence – James Cone (1976, 17)

One of the important messages that liberation theology teaches is that multilayered human existence begets various shapes and colors of hermeneutical circles in theological discourse. A person’s socio-cultural context provides a unique lens through which a person views the world and understands God’s will and work. Thus, one’s view of liberation is inevitably related to the lens in which many determinants of the person, such as his ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation, are interwoven.

In this paper, from among the many determinants that I have in my hermeneutical circle, I want to focus on my ethnicity, so that I can situate myself as a Korean and examine some meanings of Christian belief for Korean Christians. This paper explores a way in which Korean Christians can be truly liberated, in the sense of not being deprived of their own traditional religiosity, while remaining Christians at the same time. In doing so, I hope to open an avenue for genuine inter-religious dialogue.

In the first section, I will describe the necessity of inculturation for Christianity in the non-Christian world and the ways in which Korean theologians have strived to inculcate Western Christianity into Korean soil. Then I will scrutinize a weakness in the existing Korean inculturation process: an exclusive soteriology that disregards Korean religiosity. I argue that this exclusive soteriology yields the seeds of discrimination and oppression, which prevent the liberation of Korean Christians. In the second section, I will focus more on the problem of exclusive soteriology and the reasons why I believe it causes oppression. In the third section, I

will suggest a way in which the exclusive Christian soteriology can be revised and transformed into a theology that is inclusive and genuinely Christian and Korean at the same time.

## Inculturation

### I. An indispensable Process for Korean Christians

Even though the fact that I am a Korean is one of the important determinants in my identity formation, my ethnicity had never played a part in my theological questions until I came to study in the United States. Being a minority in this racially and culturally diverse society challenged me to define who I am in terms of my ethnicity.<sup>1</sup>

What is the meaning of being a Korean Christian and studying theology from my own ethnic point of view? With the help of post-colonial theology, I came to realize that I “live in a language that is not my own (Fernandez and Segovia 2006, 29).” Segovia writes,

[W]e live in a language that is not our own. [...] This is a language inherited from Western Christianity and elaborated with reference to Western Christianity. [...] It is a language, therefore, in which ethnic-racial minorities and non-Western Christians in general find themselves uprooted or deterritorialized (*Ibid.*).

The “language,” Segovia mentions, includes not only English but also the concepts and ideas that Western theology formulated through its history and tradition. I came to understand that certain ideas and concepts – such as creation, incarnation, and salvation – were not from my own tradition. At that juncture, the Christian beliefs that I had grown up with became foreign and unfamiliar.

New questions came to mind. Where did my Christian belief come from? When did it become my belief? I can only trace the root of my Christian belief to sometime around one hundred and twenty years ago when the first missionary from America came to Korea. My ancestors didn’t know Jesus or the God of Christianity. My grandparents were sincere Buddhists. They were wary of Christians because they thought Christians always tried to evangelize people of other religions by threatening them with *heaven and hell*.

After my grandparents passed away, my parents went through conversion experiences and my entire family became Christians. I was only seven at that time and I thought becoming Christian meant becoming more Westernized and, at the same time, a part of a technologically and culturally *advanced* belief system. Many of my friends went to church and became Christian for the same reason. It was definitely a “colonized mindset”<sup>2</sup> that I had in those days. The Western God seemed to be more modern and civilized, and such images made the Christian God more powerful than the gods in our own culture, which were regarded as superstitious, uncivilized, and less powerful.

If my Christian belief originated in a Western context and none of my ancestors knew Jesus and the God of Christianity before the missionaries came, in what ways can I relate my

ethnicity to my Christian belief? In what ways can I understand the Western God as a Korean? In what ways can I comprehend myself and Korean society through the lens of the Western Christian understanding of human beings and the world?

A new set of language is needed in theological discourse. A language is needed in which Koreans can find faces and voices of their own people. A language is needed in which God can be described as the *God of Koreans*. Hence, the inculturation process is indispensable for Korean Christians, whether they live in Korea or in other countries.

## II. Means of Inculturation in Korea

Korean theologians have made efforts to indigenize Christianity into the Korean context in two ways: inculturation theology and *minjung* theology. In the 1960s, inculturation theology was developed out of the awareness of Korea's own cultural and religious heritage. Inculturation theologians tried not to follow Western theology, but created Korea's own theological language through Korean cultural-religious heritage. Yoon Sung-Bum mediates Christianity through Confucianism. Yoo Dong-Sik indigenizes Christianity through Shamanism. Pyun Sun-Hwan takes Buddhism into account to explain Christianity in Korea (Suh 1984, 239).

Inculturation theology's significant contribution to Korean theology is its inclusiveness. The Christian beliefs that American missionaries had transferred to Korean Society had, in Aloysius Pieris' term, a *Christ-against- religions* type of approach toward other religions (1988, 61). Cultural inheritance ceased so that a person could become a *faithful* Christian. For instance, ancestor worship, one of the cherished Korean traditions, had to be suspended. Shamanistic and Buddhist gods, as well as other mediums of worship which Koreans had practiced for thousands of years, also had to be abandoned in order to accept Jesus as the savior, and God as *one God*. Now, with this inculturation theology, Koreans could find ways in which they could inculturate Christianity without sacrificing their own cultural and religious tradition.

Despite their endeavor to create a genuine *Korean* Christian theology, these approaches were caught in heated debates among Korean Christians and theologians. Efforts to understand God through the traditional cultural-religious heritage of Korea was denounced as syncretism. The Rev. Pyun Sun-Hwan was evicted from the Korean Methodist conference, after being accused of developing a syncretistic theology. Accordingly, Korean theologians' first attempts to incorporate Korean culture and religiosity into Christian belief were denounced.

In the 1970's, Korean theologians developed another means of inculturation. It was called *minjung* theology. The focus of *minjung* theology was no longer on the cultural-religious heritage but on the socio-political context of Korea. *Minjung*, comprised of two Chinese characters: min jung, which literally mean "the mass of people," represents those "who are oppressed politically, exploited economically, alienated socially, and kept uneducated in cultural and intellectual matters (Moon 1985, 1)." *Minjung* theologians regard those who are oppressed as *minjung* and understand salvation as liberation from various oppressions that *minjung* experience. Korean *minjung* theologians often used an analogy between the Israelites and the Koreans through their common experience of oppression (*Ibid.* 3-17). *The God of the oppressed*<sup>3</sup> in this way becomes

the God of the oppressed Korean. In so doing, our historical tragedy and experiences of oppression are used as resources in theological discourse.

1970's *minjung* theology is important because it provides precious insights for Koreans about who God is and what God is doing in the socio-historical and political existence of Koreans. However, I see one limitation of *minjung* theology when compared to the inculturation theology of the 1960s. The limitation is *minjung* theology's negation of Korean religiosity. Even though inculturation theology did not receive significant support from other theologians and Christians at that time, inculturation theology contributed to Korean theology by embracing Korean cultural religiosity and being inclusive of other religions. And I think the negation of an ethnic group's own religiosity in the process of inculturation is fundamentally related to colonialism, which is in the long-term a cause of racial and ethnic discrimination. I will delve into these related issues in the second section.

## Exclusive Christian Soteriology

### I. A Seed of Discrimination

In order to delineate the relatedness between exclusive Christian soteriology and discrimination, I would like to trace back the footsteps of colonization and Christian mission. Charles Long provides guidance in this.<sup>4</sup> When the Christian West found the New World and encountered Indians who had a different mode of religion, the Christians thought that salvation could not be and should not be given to Indians unless they surrendered their *sinful* superstitions to Christianity (Long 1995, 202). Long attributes this attitude to the Protestant theology of salvation, especially Calvin's. The knowledge of God, which they thought was given to every human being by God, is blinded and stifled by sinful superstitions. Therefore, the Puritans could only understand the Indians' ongoing superstitious deeds as an "infallible sign of negative predestination, and the unavoidable damning of the Indian's soul (Ibid)." Long asserts that this *Christ-against-religions* type of soteriology and missions already contained the seeds of racism even though Calvin himself (and the other *sincere* Christians) denounced racism. Salvation and the conditions of salvation seem to give important meanings and values to human lives.

When some behaviors and thoughts are regarded as stumbling blocks to salvation, others inevitably think of the people who do not surrender their *sinful* behaviors or thoughts as damned. When the idea of *pagan contagion* is added to the discourse and when their superstitious deeds and belief are seen as contagious and endangering to the White Christian's soul, the pagan group is devalued and dehumanized (Ibid. 203.) Furthermore, the segregation of the pagans is easily justified and the other group of people who *know the way to heaven* can try to control and instruct the pagans without feeling any guilt because it is *for their (the pagans') own good*. In this way, the exclusive Christian precept of salvation is deeply related to oppression, and especially to racial discrimination.

## II. A Call to Liberation Theologies

If the starting point of existing theology is God, liberation theologies start from people's experiences: experiences of being oppressed by sexism, classism, racism, and heterosexism. While investigating these experiences of oppression, liberation theologians delve into the ways in which liberation can be brought to the oppressed people by revisiting concepts and ideas of existing theologies. In this process of liberation, reality is not the universal truth carried throughout the world by Western missionaries. Rather, truth is found from all modes of experience and the expressions of the oppressed throughout the world. Liberation theologies should be receptive to the truth from people of the non-Christian world and hear what God is doing in their history by embracing their culture and religiosity.

For this reason, I think now is the time for theologians who are concerned about the oppressed and their liberation to take the exclusive Christian soteriology into consideration and revise it. In this regards, Kwok Pui-lan gives credit to C. S. Song when he criticizes a negative effect of the prophetic traditions in 'Third-World' theology. Most Asian theologians, according to Kwok, find relevant points from the prophetic tradition. Sometimes, they criticize the corruption of existing religious systems, and at other times, they identify their pluralistic contexts with that of Hebrew prophets. Despite all of the important roles of the prophetic tradition in 'Third-World' theology, the prophetic tradition failed to value the religious symbols and cultures of other religions. Accordingly, "the prophets' negative attitude toward other religions has contributed to the distrust of popular religion and an insensitivity to theological motifs expressed in other religious and cultural idioms" (Kwok 1995, 60-61).

Just as *minjung* theology failed to appreciate Korean cultural-religiosity while focusing on the economic and political situations of Korea, other liberation theologies overlooked the culture and religiosity of the non-Christian world while they were concerned with the socio-political and economic situations in their theology.

## III. A Response to the Call: A New Inculturation Theology

One of the ways in which Korean liberation theology can respond to the call to revise exclusive soteriology is by making another attempt to develop an inculturation theology which embraces Korean culture and religiosity. I think that Korean theologians can get some insights from African inculturation theologians who boldly insist that African culture and religiosity is their "God-given heritage." (Martey 1993, 72). Luke Mbefo writes:

God had spoken to our ancestors before the arrival of Christianity; our ancestors had responded to God's address before the arrival of Christianity. [...] The task is to discover how this word was heard and its repercussions in the life of our ancestors. [African] theologians believe that Christianity should continue, through fulfillment, this original Word of God [which had been given to the life of ancestors] (Ibid. 73).

African theologians, in their inculturation process, took their traditional religion, culture and philosophy as one of the sources of their theology. Koreans should similarly use their heritage as sources of theology. As Pieris writes, “in our Asian context, religion is life itself rather than a function of it, being the all-pervasive ethos of human existence (Pieris 1988, 90).” Korean Christianity cannot be developed without the religio-cultural heritage that is within the fabric of our lives and existence.

Until now, Korean culture – and especially our religious culture – was not permitted to become a source of theology. When Korean feminist theologian Chung Hyun Kyung gave her speech at World Council of Churches Assembly in Canberra, Australia in February 1991,<sup>5</sup> most theologians in Korea criticized her action and speech as blasphemy. Her speech started as she took off her shoes and called on all the spirits who had been oppressed in human history: “With humble heart and body, let us listen to the cries of creation and the cries of the Spirit within it.” Chung introduced a Korean concept of *han*, which is the feeling of bitterness, anger, resentment, and grief that originates from various forms of oppression. She called on *han*-ridden spirits in human history because she believed that one cannot hear the voice of the Holy Spirit without hearing the cries of these spirits, through which the Holy Spirit has communicated her compassion and wisdom for life. Then she asked listeners to repent as a way of answering the Holy Spirit’s calling. Denouncing anthropocentrism and dualism, she brought the concept of *ki* and the image of *kwan in* from Asian traditional philosophy and Buddhism (Hyun Kyung 1991). Most Korean theologians condemned her shamanistic costume, her theological linking of the *han*-spirit with the Holy Spirit, and her Korean traditional shamanistic rituals for calling spirits. After her WCC speech, she suffered furious criticism. Even at present, Chung Hyun Kyung’s name is often discussed in connection to the speech.

I see Chung’s speech at Canberra as her attempt to initiate a new way of formulating inculturation theology. It is different from the previous version of Korean inculturation theology, which did not include women and other oppressed people – *minjung*. *Minjung* theology failed to value Korean culture, religiosity, and philosophy. Chung believes that God has existed with Koreans throughout their history, even before the Western missionaries came. She envisions our life as our text, in which God’s revelation takes place and the Bible and church tradition as the context and reference point for theology (Chung 1990, 111). As Justin Ukpong explains with regard to inculturation, Chung tries to “re-think” and “re-express” the original Christian message in a Korean cultural milieu. In so doing, Koreans can hope for the “integration of faith and culture,” from which is born “a new theological reflection that is African [or Korean] and Christian” (Martey 1993, 68).

Before initiating a new inculcation theology, however, Korean Christians need to resolve the fear of losing their Christian identity in the process of inculcation. This fear seems to come from the unique history of Christian missions in Korea.

Pieris analyzes the main causes for the failure of Christian missions: denouncing Asian culture and religiosity and “colonial Christ (Ibid. 59-61).” Pieris writes, “...after four centuries of colonialism, Asia has surrendered only about two percent of its population to Christianity

(Ibid. 59)." Ironically, however, these two factors in the failure of missions in Asia (denouncing Asian culture and religiosity and the "colonial Christ") worked differently in Korea. The Christian mission in Korea was not a failure at all, even with those two negative factors.

As I mentioned before, the Christian belief that American missionaries transferred to Korean Society has a *Christ-against-religions* type of approach toward other religions. Cultural inheritance was forgotten so that a person could become a *faithful* Christian. When Christian missionaries came to Korea, Korea was under Japanese rule, and Korea later endured the Korean War. Colonization (under the name of *civilization*) went hand in hand with Christianization. In this process of colonization and Christianization in Korea, Korean religiosity was disregarded while the colonial Christ was accepted. Ironically, after being deprived of their cultural and religious heritage and suffering under the colonial Christ, the population of Christians in South Korea grew dramatically. They account for more than 50 percent (Protestant: 36.8%; Catholic: 13.7%) of the religious population and almost 30 percent of the entire population (Korea Statistical Information Service 2003).

Due to the successful missions in Korea for the last hundred and twenty years, Korean Christians are inclined to hold onto the old Korean Christianity, which has Westernized images of Jesus, God, and church tradition. In so doing, they hope for an ongoing success in their mission to spread the good news to more people in Korea, as the old Korean Christianity did triumphantly.

In my view, however, this success story for Christian missionaries might not have a victorious ending without an inculturation and revision of the exclusive *Christ-against-religion* type of approaches in the inculturation process. The fear of losing Christian identity should not stand in the way of inculturation any more. Embracing our own ethnic, cultural, and religious heritage will not cause us to lose our Christian identity. "All religious experiences are an inculturated one (Hayes 2006, 58)." As Diana Hayes articulates, Christianity has also been inculturated in history since the first century. Even though Korean Christians did not recognize the influence of Korean religiosity in Korean Christianity, Christianity in Korea has *already* been formulated through its cultural, social, religious and historical experiences. Such an inculturation process is inevitable in people's religious practice even though Christian authorities denounced this inheritance.<sup>6</sup> For instance, early morning prayer, which is a unique tradition of Korean Christians, originated from shamanism.<sup>7</sup>

From now on, the inculturation process should be addressed openly in theological discourse. If symbols, ideas, and concepts of Christianity are not renamed and revisited within this lens of inheritance, Christianity will not become a religion that is truly Korean and Christian at the same time. Christianity will merely remain a foreign religion from the West, which colonizes Koreans' consciousnesses.

## Conclusion

"We Asian women theologians must move away from our imposed fear of losing Christian identity" (Chung 1990, 113). Chung encourages Asian women theologians to become

braver and to risk “the survival-liberation centered syncretism (*Ibid*).” To her, syncretism is not a dangerous word that destroys Christian identity and causes confusion for Christians. Rather, it is a way in which we can be transformed and informed by the wisdom of our own people so that we can really listen to people’s cries and answer their cries with healing and comforting power.

Christian faith is not about protecting the “doctrinal purity of Christian theology.” For Koreans, becoming Christian is taking part in the liberating mission of Jesus Christ for our own people in the Korea peninsula, in our own *Korean Christian* ways. For this reason, revisiting Christian soteriology will provide the foundation for Korean Christians to think rigorously about their Christian faith and ethnic identity. In doing so, a door of inter-religious dialogue can also be opened.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jung Young Lee explains the racial and ethnic situation of Asian Americans in the U.S. and how various determinants of marginality are interconnected. Jung Young Lee, *Marginality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 33-35.

<sup>2</sup> This colonized mindset originates from the historical interrelatedness between Christian mission and civilization during colonial period. Kwok Pui-lan delineates those days: "During the heyday of colonialism, European powers and the United States justified occupying other peoples' lands by claiming it was for the natives' own good, since they would be able to hear the Gospel and benefit from education, health care, and other Western cultural products. Spreading the Gospel was an integral part of the civilizing mission..." Kwok Pui-lan, "A Postcolonial Reading: Sexual Morality and National Politics," *Engaging the Bible: Critical Readings from Contemporary Women*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006) p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> The meaning of this term is from James Cone's *God of the Oppressed*, (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1997)

<sup>4</sup> I consulted with Charles H. Long's *Sinification: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, Colorado: The Davis Group Publishers, 1995). Even though the entire book deals with phenomena and causes of oppression, the final chapter of this book "Chapter12. Freedom, Otherness, and religion: Theologies Opaque" meets with liberation theologies.

<sup>5</sup> An edited version of her speech can be found at  
<http://www.ctausa.org/foundationdocs/foundhyunkkyung.html>

<sup>6</sup> Choi Jun- Sik, a Korean scholar in religion, insists the strong possibility of the inevitable influence of Shamanism to Christianity. Choi Jun-Sik, *HanKukEui JongKyo, MoonHwaRo IkNeunDa(Korean), Understanding Korean Religion through cultural perspective*, (Seoul:SaGeJeol,1998), pp. 67-72.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, Korean Christians try to find the origin from Jesus' Morning Prayer or from Rev. Kil Sun-Joo's early Morning Prayer meeting in the 1900s but I think shamanism is a more reasonable explanation.

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## Communicative Action: A Way Forward for Inter-Religious Dialogue

By Brian Douglas

### Abstract

This article explores the theory of communicative action of the philosopher Jurgen Habermas as a way forward for inter-religious dialogue. Communicative action based on the intersubjectivity, rationality and force of argumentative speech stands in contrast to the boundary marking of hermeneutic idealism. Communicative action distinguishes between the particularity of one's lifeworld and the universality of a system paradigm. Communicative action is seen as a way for inter-religious dialogue to explore the importance of various religious traditions. Whilst arguing that communicative action requires an individual to step outside the solipsism of her own lifeworld, this article also acknowledges the importance of an individual's particular religious interests.

Early in 2008, Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury and leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion, made headlines throughout the world following a lecture he delivered at the Royal Courts of Justice in London (Williams 2008a). The Archbishop suggested that aspects of sharia law should be used by Muslims in the United Kingdom to resolve personal and domestic issues such as marriage and property disputes. The Archbishop said he thought that the use of sharia law was an inevitable development in Britain. Media reaction to the Archbishop's speech was extreme, with some commentators saying that he was giving heart to Muslim terrorists (*The Sun* 2008). The Archbishop did receive support for his views from a number of prominent people, including the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Phillips of Worth Matravers (Beavan 2008). Lord Phillips argued that the Archbishop's comments had not been clearly understood by all and that "a point that the Archbishop was making was that it was possible for individuals voluntarily to conduct their lives in accordance with sharia principles, without this being in conflict with the rights guaranteed by our laws." Lord Phillips added that it was "not very radical to advocate embracing sharia law in the context of family disputes" since "there is no reason why principles of sharia law, or other religious codes, should not be the basis for mediation or other forms of alternative dispute resolution (*Ibid.*)."

In a subsequent statement from the Archbishop (Williams 2008b), it was made clear that the speech really concerned taking other people's religions seriously. The Archbishop argued that if society wants to achieve cohesion then such a serious attitude to other religious traditions needs to be encouraged. The Archbishop acknowledged that Islamic courts already existed in Britain dealing with divorce and financial matters and that greater use of these courts was inevitable. He made the point that there was a clear need to protect the rights of all parties while at the same time acknowledging there were limits to a unitary legal system in an increasingly

plural society. The Archbishop clearly stated that he was not proposing a supplementary jurisdiction to deny other people their rights.

This whole episode provokes some challenging questions about inter-religious dialogue. Why does a serious, nuanced voice raised in a public debate find itself so fiercely criticized and howled down? Is there a deep-seated fear of other religions, which actually debilitates serious inter-religious debate? Is the very nature of serious and critical inter-religious debate itself in question? Is there a place for society to name and face its fear and ignorance of other religious traditions? As Andrew McGowen points out, the Archbishop's real concern in his lecture was to ask fundamental questions about the relationship between the practices and identities of faith communities, including the Christian Church, and the fundamentals of civil law in a pluralist society (McGowen 2008).

The work of the modern philosopher Jürgen Habermas, which asks how reliable knowledge is possible, may assist in answering this question about the nature of inter-religious dialogue (Habermas 1971, 3). Habermas explored the apparent divisions in knowledge under the three headings of "empirical-analytic", "historical-hermeneutic" and "self-reflective", explaining these notions by reference to what he called "cognitive interest". Particular cognitive interests impel different ways of knowing. The cognitive interest in control in the empirical-analytic or technical way of knowing was the storing up of essential facts and figures in order to manage one's world. In the historical-hermeneutic or interpretative way of knowing the goal was to understand one's world, whereas the cognitive interest of the self-reflective or critical way of knowing was emancipation. In this critical way of knowing the goal is knowing oneself rather than prosecuting partisan knowledge that people often accept in an uncritical manner because it is safe or politically correct or the product of indoctrination.

The third way of knowing alerts us to the power of overturning unreflective action in favour of a more critical or self-reflective approach. Habermas goes on to develop these ideas in two major works that address his theory of communicative action as a means of examining the integrity of a discourse (Habermas 1984 and 1989). Indeed, in translating Habermas's books into English, Thomas McCarthy has coined the term 'hermeneutic idealism' to describe the process where this critical approach to discourse is not followed. McCarthy speaks of hermeneutic idealism as a way of conceptualizing of reality that is dependent on one's own (or one's 'communal groups') beliefs, values and interpretations, whilst at the same time remaining blind to their causes, backgrounds and those wider connections that would contextualize them and help those holding them to see that they are in fact just one set of beliefs, values and interpretations in a sea of related and unrelated sets (McCarthy 1984 xxvi).

Where hermeneutic idealism remains the focus of one's way of knowing, the integrity of any discourse is threatened. This seems to be exactly the case in some of the criticism of Rowan Williams's speech. For some, it seems that reality is totally dependent on their own beliefs, values and interpretations whilst the broader issues relating to an increasingly pluralistic society and the role of inter-religious dialogue remain unconsidered in any critical manner. For others, such as Lord Phillips, it is possible to approach the discourse in a critical manner while at the same time asserting the rights of others in society.

Not all religious leaders share this view. In his 2003 “Commencement Sermon” as the new Dean of St Andrew’s Cathedral in Sydney, Australia, Phillip Jensen, spoke against the principles of inter-religious dialogue, saying that “we must stop the stupidity of stretching social tolerance into religious or philosophical relativism.” For Jensen this meant that “if other religions are wrong, they are the monstrous lies and deceits of Satan devised to destroy the life of the believer” (Jensen 2003). Jensen’s views suggest a distinct hermeneutic idealism and an inability to engage in inter-religious dialogue in a critical manner. The negative reaction to Rowan Williams’s speech and the content of Phillip Jensen’s Commencement Sermon raise the issue of hermeneutic idealism versus a more critical approach to truth. Is this critical approach to the “truths” of other religions merely relativism, as Jensen asserts, or are there are other ways of examining inter-religious dialogue? Habermas helps us here by suggesting the use of a dialogue approach, which is based on his theory of communicative action.

A dialogue approach has the potential of allowing what Habermas calls the intersubjectivity of communicative action and therefore suggests that inter-religious dialogue, if it is to present a critical interest, needs to allow for the expression of the varied voices of different traditions (be they religious or otherwise) without privileging any one voice over others (Habermas 1984 and 1989). In short, this means not permitting any one hermeneutic interest to have privilege over other interests. Such an approach presents a way forward for inter-religious dialogue since it attempts to bring a critical focus and intent to the discourse of inter-religious dialogue while at the same time acknowledging the diversity of interests within the various religious traditions without privileging any. A process of dialogue can operate as communicative action, where dialogue places emphasis on the intersubjectivity of shared meaning and understanding rather than seeking ownership of any one interest.

Habermas acknowledges that, since the beginning of the modern Enlightenment era, Western thought has often taken the view that science and technology hold out the promise of limitless advances, with accompanying moral and political improvement. Not all commentators, including Habermas, agree with this vision. Stephen White, for example, points out that one of the most distinctive features of the intellectual activity of the final years of the twentieth century has been the doubts raised about the conceptual foundations of Western modernity, with hard questions being asked about these predominant understandings of reason, subjectivity, nature, progress and gender (White 1995, 3). Habermas does not, however, advocate the abandonment of the project of the Enlightenment, but rather argues for its redirection. This he does in his two volume work, *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Here he puts the case that reason can be defended only by way of a critique of reason. His concept of rationality is thus one that is no longer tied to and limited by subjectivistic and individualistic premises, but rather he argues for an integration of what he calls the “lifeworld” and “system paradigms.” Habermas views the fundamental problem of social theory as being the question of how to connect in a satisfactory manner the two conceptual strategies of “lifeworld” and “system” (Habermas 1989, 151). Systems are understood to be open and to maintain themselves, even in the face of unstable and hypercomplex environments, through interchange processes across their boundaries. Systems, such as religious traditions, are concerned with the maintenance of society, and their fundamental

nature and identity is the means by which a society stands or falls. The concerns of system paradigms include matters such as culture, social integration and socialization, and it is these that function as boundary-maintaining systems for the society as a whole. System paradigms steer society in powerful and persistent ways with universal significance, whereas lifeworlds are often characterized by the separation of culture, society, and personality (Habermas 1989, 152).

“Lifeworld” for Habermas has a particularity about it and is made up of the “culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretative patterns” often sedimented in texts, traditions and cultural artifacts or in organized institutions, systems and structures, such that ideas are embodied in cultural value spheres, in personality structures and in social institutions with their particular conflicts and interests based on the organization of authority and political power (Habermas 1989, 124, 108 and Habermas 1984, xiv). Religious traditions often correspond to this description of lifeworlds. Lifeworlds often differ from the normal world-concepts or systems in that lifeworlds are often associated with particular individuals or groups of people and the traditions they see as sacred. World-concepts or system paradigms are seen as more fundamental, involving criticizable validity claims, based on a frame or categorical scaffolding that serves to order problematic situations, involving “suppositions of commonality” (Habermas 1989, 125 and Habermas 1984, 102). Inter-religious dialogue often seeks to tap into these fundamental suppositions of commonality as people explore the dimensions of shared and different religious experience. Communicative action therefore points beyond the particular to the more universal aspects of society. Habermas says that:

the aspects of the rationality of action we found in communicative action should now permit us to grasp processes of societal rationalization across the whole-breadth, and no longer solely from the selective viewpoint of purposive rational action (Habermas 1984, 335).

World-concepts and system paradigms point beyond the circle of those immediately involved and have claims valid for outside interpreters as well, whereas lifeworlds are seen as being already substantially interpreted and as such often prevent those in such a lifeworld from stepping outside of it (Habermas 1989, 126). Lifeworlds, therefore, are the unquestioned ground of everything given in a person’s experience and the unquestionable frame in which all the problems a person has to deal with are located. Lifeworlds are said to be both intuitively present, and therefore familiar and transparent, as well as being vast and incalculable webs of presuppositions that need to be satisfied if an actual utterance is to be meaningful, that is, valid or invalid. Lifeworlds are very much taken for granted, and maintain themselves beyond the threshold of criticizable convictions (*Ibid.* 131). Lifeworlds, therefore, can take the form of sacred truth, such as that often found in religious traditions. For those who find it impossible to free themselves from the naïve, situation-oriented attitude of being actors caught up in the communicative practice of everyday life within their lifeworld, it is impossible to grasp the limitations of that lifeworld since these actors cannot get behind the context of their lifeworld and examine it with critical intent. Further, they see their lifeworld as a context that cannot be gotten behind and so

their critical interest is limited by their hermeneutic idealism (Habermas 1989, 133). This seems to be the case for someone such as Phillip Jensen.

Habermas's response to this decline of the paradigm of consciousness, where a person is prevented by the very constraints of their lifeworld from stepping out of their lifeworld and engaging with world-concepts, is to propose an explicit shift to the paradigm of language – not to language as a syntactic or semantic system, but to what he calls language-in-use or speech or communicative action (McCarthy 1984, ix). Habermas says that:

the concept of *communicative action* refers to the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relations (whether by verbs or by extra-verbal means). The actors seek to reach an understanding about the action situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement. The central concept of *interpretation* refers in the first instance to negotiating definitions of the situations which admit of consensus. ... Language is given a prominent place in this model (Habermas 1984, 86).

Communicative action involves a shift of focus from the teleological to the communicative dimension, where the analysis of language as social action is the basic medium of communication. The teleological aspect refers to the realizing of one's aims or the carrying out of one's plan of action, whereas the communicative aspect refers to the interpretation of a situation and arriving at some agreement (Habermas 1989, 126). Rationality therefore, for Habermas, "has less to do with the possession of knowledge than with how speaking and acting subjects *acquire and use knowledge*" (Habermas 1984, 8). For Habermas, this involves intersubjective recognition for the various validity claims of those who may hold differing positions and views, and for the reasons and grounds for these differing positions. Habermas argues that:

In communicative action, the very outcome of interaction is even made to depend on whether the participants can come to an agreement among themselves on an *intersubjectively valid* appraisal of their relations to the world. On this model of action, an interaction can succeed only if those involved arrive at a consensus among themselves, a consensus that depends on yes/no responses to claims potentially based on grounds (Ibid. 106).

Habermas argues that it is possible to reach agreement about differing and disputed positions by means of argument and shared insights that do not depend on force, but rather on reasons and grounds. It is this process of critique or argumentation that allows communicative action and rationality to proceed (Ibid. 17-18). Agreement between parties then rests on the sharing of common convictions and functions as a communicatively shared intersubjectivity where

reflection on one's own affective and practical nature means that people act in a self-critical attitude (Ibid. 287). Habermas says that:

this concept of *communicative rationality* carries with it connotations based ultimately on the central experience of the unconstrained, unifying, consensus bringing force of argumentative speech, in which different participants overcome their merely subjective views and, owing to the mutuality of rationally motivated conviction, assure themselves of both the unity of the objective world and the intersubjectivity of their lifeworlds (Ibid. 10).

Not only does this result in mutual convictions, but also “in coordinating their actions by way of intersubjectively recognizing criticisable validity claims, they are at once relying on membership in social groups and strengthening the integration of those same groups” (Habermas 1989, 137). There are therefore important benefits deriving from communicative action, not only for mutual understanding but also for group integration and harmony between inter-religious traditions.

This way of acting, however, means that, in order to adopt a critical interest and engage in communicative action, people would need to objectify their lifeworld as a boundary-maintaining system rather than assuming that their lifeworld is *the system* and the way things are in a universal sense. Here Habermas distinguishes between “instrumental mastery” and “communicative action,” in that instrumental mastery is often employed in the appropriation of a hermeneutic, whereas communicative action maintains a critical focus (Habermas 1984, 11). This means “an interpreter can go beyond this *subjectively* purposive-rational orientation and compare the actual course of action with the constructed case of a corresponding *objectively* purposive-rational course of action” (Ibid. 102). Communicative action or communicative rationality therefore, Habermas argues, pays attention to the seams between system and lifeworld, since it is the seams that hold the potential for emancipation from the power of particular hermeneutic interests as well as resistance to more self-critical attitudes. These “seams” are the points of intersection, where there can be both harmony and conflict, and it is these seams that could form the basis for the inter-religious dialogue that is the argumentation of communicative action and rationality.

Any process of inter-religious dialogue is therefore severely constrained by a desire to maintain control and ownership of the system in the sense that the system is seen by some to be equivalent to the lifeworld of an individual, group or tradition. Habermas therefore states that “in the context of communicative action, only those persons count as responsible who, as members of a communicative community, can orient their actions to intersubjectively recognized validity claims” (Ibid. 14). This greater degree of communicative rationality in turn expands, says Habermas, “the scope for unconstrained coordination of actions and consensual resolution of conflicts” (Ibid. 15).

Habermas argues that the Enlightenment’s promise of life informed by reason cannot be redeemed so long as the rationality that finds expression in society is deformed by capitalist modernization or by the laws of history (McCarthy 1984, xxxvii). Ownership exerts itself

through “hermeneutic idealism,” where the view or views of some participants in society are taken, by these participants and others, to be *the* view or *the* system paradigm, and where such a perspective only succeeds in blinding the participants to causes, connections, and consequences that lie beyond the lifeworld of the everyday practice of an individual, groups, or institutions. For Habermas, therefore, intersubjective understanding based on communicative expression cannot be carried out in a solipsistic manner. Participation with others in a process of reaching understanding, such as inter-religious dialogue proposes, is therefore seen as essential. Where understanding is seen to be hermetically sealed in a particular religious tradition or hermeneutic interest, the lifeworld remains closed and can only be opened when there is a desire and competence to speak and act in a spirit of participation and where there is communication which encourages people to become at least potential members of a lifeworld (Habermas 1984, 112). This means that the “processes of reaching understanding are aimed at a consensus that depends on the intersubjective recognition of validity claims; and these claims can be reciprocally raised and fundamentally criticized by participants in communication” (Ibid. 136). This suggests that the purpose of rational communicative action is not egocentric ownership of knowledge or power, but the act of reaching understanding. Participants can still be oriented to their own interests, but they do this under conditions that harmonize their plans of action on the basis of common situational definitions (Ibid. 286). This is what Habermas calls “an ideal communicative community,” where critical interest is beyond the understanding of a particular hermeneutic interest and where communicative action performs the task of coordinating and mediating (Habermas 1989, 2). This suggests that such critical interest brings about “the emergence of a higher-level form of life characterized by a linguistically constituted form of intersubjectivity that makes communicative action possible” (Ibid. 10-11). In such a form of life, language functions as a medium of not only reaching understanding and transmitting cultural knowledge, but also as a means of socialization and social integration. These take place through acts of reaching understanding where the authority of the holy (that is, the lifeworld and its particular hermeneutic interest) is gradually replaced by the authority of an achieved consensus (Ibid. 24-5 and 77). This suggests a moving beyond a particular hermeneutic interest (that is, the holy) and into the area of the binding and bonding force of criticizable validity. When this occurs there is a movement towards social integration that is no longer dependent on institutionalized values but on intersubjective recognition of validity claims (Ibid. 89). When a situation is communicatively mediated, the action norms of the participants depend on shared situation definitions that refer simultaneously to the objective, the normative and the subjective facets of the situation in question. Dialogue or communication rationality in action does not therefore mean the abandonment of subjective meaning or particular technical or hermeneutic interests and the focussing on the intersubjective alone, but rather an acknowledgement both of the “ego” of the speaker who has expressed his or her experiences (the subjective aspect of a hermeneutic interest) but also of the “ego” that refers to someone as a member of a social group who is entering into an interpersonal relation (the intersubjective) with (at least) one other member (Ibid. 90). Communicative action seeks this type of shared understanding.

More recently Habermas has addressed the tension between secular society and religion in a world post 11 September, 2001 (Habermas 2001). He argues that in such a world faced with terrorism, the world “must find a common language beyond the mute violence of terrorism” which takes the form of “a world-wide, civilizing power of formation” (*Ibid.* 2). Such a “work of reflection” as he calls it “is a process that runs its course through the public spheres of democracy” (*Ibid.* 3) and as such has the power to be useful to “both believers and non-believers” whom he argues “will press upon each other their ideologically impregnated world-views and so will stumble upon the harsh reality of ideological pluralism” (*Ibid.* 4) where people try “to see the issue from the other’s perspective” (*Ibid.* 6). Here then is Habermas reflecting on the nature of communicative action in the face of world tension and terrorism and offering a way forward through the critical rationality of communicative action.

For Habermas, this process of dialogue is vital since the dialogue of communicative action has the potential to prevent citizens being “isolated monads acting on the basis of their own self-interest” and “persons who used their subjective rights only as weapons against each other” (Habermas 2005, 35). Instead, argues Habermas in his dialogue with Ratzinger, people need to acknowledge “the identical dignity of all men that deserves unconditional respect” and “which goes beyond the borders of one particular religious fellowship” (*Ibid.* 45) and which rests on “a coordination of action based on values, norms, and a vocabulary intended to promote mutual understanding” (*Ibid.* 45-46). The imperative for action, expressed some years earlier though an appeal to communicative action has found a new impetus in the face of world terrorism and in a situation where Habermas himself, a professed atheist, practices the critical rationality of communicative action of which he speaks in a dialogue with the man who, as Pope Benedict XVI, would become the next leader of the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, Habermas argues that religious communities in their renunciation of violence as part of the propagation of their faith are entitled to be called reasonable where such a role of the faithful functions within a pluralistic society (Habermas 2001, 3). Habermas therefore concedes a role for religions in the face of modern terrorism and argues that “without this reflective ‘thrust,’ monotheisms within ruthlessly modernizing societies develop a destructive potential” (*Ibid.* 3). Whereas Habermas recognizes a role for religions, at the same time he deprecates hermeneutic idealism. For Habermas, “love cannot exist without knowledge of another, nor can freedom exist without mutual recognition” (*Ibid.* 7). This allows him to say therefore, as a person in dialogue with religious traditions, that religion “has something to say even to those who have no ear for religion, among whom I count myself” in the sense that “the gift of a divine form to man is taken to mean that no hindrance be placed on man’s right to self-determination” (*Ibid.* 8).

Rowan Williams’ speech to the Royal Courts of Justice is also an attempt to enter into the critical rationality of communicative action as he reflected on the need for dialogue in his own situation in the United Kingdom. Like Habermas’ reflection, Williams’s speech represents an attempt to step aside from one’s own position and to engage in a serious manner with the lifeworld of other speakers in the discourse of communicative action. As such Williams’ words, like those of Habermas, make a valuable contribution to the intersubjectivity of inter-religious dialogue.

Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action serves as a way forward for inter-religious dialogue in that it provides a theoretical framework for moving apart from one's firmly held lifeworld and engaging with a system paradigm, that is, the religious experience of human beings and the meeting together of those who accept different religious traditions. Habermas' work also suggests that the danger of hermeneutic idealism can often be, in a Habermasian perspective at least, the relativism that some such as Phillip Jensen accuse others of holding.

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## Common Ground in Eco-Christianity and Eco-Buddhism

By Stephen Hastings

### Abstract

Buddhist environmentalist Ian Harris holds that “the emergence of eco-religiosity, a specifically religious concern for the environment, has manifest[ed] itself as a significant theme in the major religions of the late twentieth-century” (Harris, 1990). The purpose of this paper is to reveal common ground between Buddhism and Christianity that can promote healthy dialogue and mutual action to address the present ecological crisis. I have found that the Christian version of “eco-religiosity” can be summarized by three terms: 1) relatedness; 2) responsibility; and 3) redemption. After defining and offering support for these terms, I apply them to a number of Buddhist writings and demonstrate how they offer a common language that provides both ontological and material underpinnings for Buddhist and Christian environmental awareness and ethics. In doing so, I demonstrate that at least two ‘major religions’ find themselves engaged in this common and global context of ecological crisis and reach similar, constructive conclusions.

### Eco-Christianity

#### I. Relatedness

In the 20th century, ecology emerged as the science of the community of nature. One cannot define any living being in isolation from its environment, but only in relation to its environment. That relation is essential to the identity of the living being. For example, an owl is not just a bird. It is a bird that prefers certain kinds of woodlands to others, hunts particular night creatures and not others, prefers certain waking and sleeping hours over others, and so on. Furthermore, evolution states that owls, and all species, derive from a very complex interplay of natural influences, played out over long periods of time. The wide spectrum of differentiation that we find in nature has occurred within the context of the dynamic relatedness of all things, at any time and over eons of time, which makes differentiation possible. As John Muir described it:

Nature is ever at work building and pulling down, creating and destroying, keeping everything whirling and flowing, allowing no rest but in rhythmical motion, chasing everything in endless song out of one beautiful form into another. (Muir, 1899)

Perhaps a run-on sentence, but that is a good way to think of the creation: a run-on sentence. It forever speaks something new in "endless song." The creative process of life is organic, and some writers of eco-theology and biology go so far as to speak of the earth and even

the universe as a kind of “life” itself. Like Muir before him, the Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson speaks of nature in such a way:

Living nature is nothing more than the commonality of organisms in the wild state and the physical and chemical equilibrium their species generate through interaction with one another. But it is also nothing less than the commonality and equilibrium (Wilson 2006, 32).

Those who refer to a “life force” or a “living spirit” are usually referring to this kind of interaction that underlies and supports “living nature.” One hears this in Rosemary Radford Ruether’s characterization of earth as “Gaia, the living and sacred earth (1992, 1).” I define living nature as the God-given order of relatedness through which creation happens: it is the ongoing, pervasive, and relational genesis from which species emerge and evolve.

This understanding differs from the traditional interpretation of the biblical creation story, which remains in conflict with the science of ecology, the theory of evolution, and modern cosmology. Yet the notion of a dynamic and living earth is not without its support from the Christian tradition, when viewed in light of the ecological crisis. For example, Thomas Aquinas speaks of God as the primary cause of creation with each created thing functioning as a secondary cause unto its God-given end: its *telos*. While in the time of Aquinas creation was viewed in a relatively static and hierarchical sense, today we can interpret the ecological and, particularly, the evolutional aspects of nature in a teleological sense. God’s creation seeks to create. The creation itself seeks to “be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:22, NRSV).” It seeks to live, grow, survive, thrive, and evolve as a whole, and it is not simply the sum of independent species that over and over again reach the same, unchanging ends in every subsequent generation. This may not have been Aquinas’ exact intention, and Ruether is correct in assuming that “there is no ready-made ecological spirituality and ethic in past [Christian] traditions (Ruether 1992, 206).” However, the theme of God-given ends in creation is a fundamental part of Christian tradition and adds sacred meaning to the view of a living earth.

Nature in all its relatedness is not just an instrument of survival and evolution; it is also the element of sacrament. These two aspects cannot be separated. In *De Visione Dei* (The Vision of God), the 15<sup>th</sup> century mystic Nicholas of Cusa characterizes a sacramental beholding and experience of nature that is an emerging aspect of the spirituality in today’s eco-Christianity:

O Lord, that sweetness by which You now feed my soul is so great that my soul is somehow aided by means of what it experiences in this world and by means of those most agreeable likenesses which You inspire (Cusa, 23).

The imagery of tasting and partaking of food that nourishes the soul, and yet comes from the very things around him, is not only sacramental but eco-spiritual.

Ecology is a science, of course, but in the most comprehensive sense. It is an affirmation of all things in all things: all things are “unfolded” (Cusa) into some kind of distinction, but never

into isolation and independence. Likewise, all things enfold back toward oneness and, ultimately, their Source and Creator God. The simple taste of sweet food enfolds back to stimulate in the person the taste of divine sweetness in the soul. This opens up the possibility for a spirituality that explicitly affirms the immanence of God in creation. God is in all the details of creation and life on earth, meaning not just in the “beauty of the earth,” but there as well with the downtrodden, the polluted, the profaned, the exploited – all the victims, be they humankind or otherkind. Thus, in the teachings of eco-Christianity, one commonly hears a hope for the rediscovery of divine revelation in nature, wherein we will find clues as to what ought and what ought not be allowed in a living, evolving, communal, and sacramental world. “In such a renewal,” says Thomas Berry, “lies our hope for the future and for ourselves and the entire planet on which we live (Berry 1999, 106).”

## II. Responsibility

To seek the well-being of the earth we must first accept our place of mutual relatedness in the ecological whole. Then, in the context of ecological relationships, we can define ethical behavior as that which sustains the diversity and natural processes of life. This begins with education, especially in ecology, but also in evolution and modern-cosmology, which tie together as the creation story. In *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World*, Holmes Rolston asserts, “The first lesson learned in evolution was perhaps one of conflict, but a subsequent one is of kinship, for the life we value in persons is advanced from but allied with the life in monkeys, perch, and lousewort (Rolston 1988, 23).” He then places this idea within a religious framework:

Mixed with other values, this Noah principle of preserving a breeding population is powerfully present in the Endangered Species Act. But if life generically is of value, then every specific individual in some degree insists on this value, and this is why, without due cause, it is a sin to kill a mockingbird (*Ibid.* 23).

Rolston moves from observing that in evolution all things are related to making inferences about value and ethical behavior, and in doing so uses religious language and religious story. He brings together the natural (evolution), the doctrinal (sin), and the biblical (the Noah principle) as an integration of religion and science, observing, “We do now find a trend in nature – its projecting of life, stability, integrity, culminating in a sense of beauty when humans enter the scene – that we ought to follow (in the axiological sense)... (*Ibid.* 225).” Based on this evolutional trend in nature, he jumps to a religious imperative, concluding that we should “love your neighborhood as you do yourself,” (*Ibid.* 312) and extend its application to other creatures on the basis of ecological and evolutionary science. It is our responsibility as aesthetically conscious and moral beings to understand, accept, and integrate scientific knowledge into our religious thought and practices; and then to respect, protect, enhance, and even enjoy the goodness of the diversity and creative, sustaining dynamics of God’s creation.

It is also worth noting the factor of spirituality, deriving from that sense of divine immanence in creation, which influences spiritual experience and how we behave as human beings. In *What Are They Saying About Environmental Theology?*, John Hart lifts up the notion of a “sacramental universe,” which he describes in this way:

The Spirit permeates all of creation; all creation in some way has the potential to be revelatory of divine presence. On such occasions, this experience of divine presence is a sacramental moment in the sacramental commons of a sacramental universe (Hart 2004, 102).

From this perspective, life in creation and on earth is filled with what one might call sacramental moments with a small “s,” – those not limited to the two or seven Sacraments of mainline Protestant or Roman Catholic doctrine.

Panentheism is the emerging theological understanding of God that affirms a “sacramental commons” in a “sacramental universe.” Matthew Fox, in particular, has brought this new understanding to light, although he might argue that he is only recovering a theology that has been marginalized by the Church, referencing writings such as those of Hildegard of Bingen and Meister Eckhart (Fox 1983). Most eco-Christianity today embraces panentheism as the underlying basis for spirituality and religious development, including ethical development. Briefly put, panentheism affirms both the transcendence and immanence of God with respect to the creation. This is to say that the creation is in God and God is in the creation, but God is not limited to the creation. A common conclusion in eco-Christian literature is that there will be no stopping the ecological crisis without claiming or reclaiming the role the earth plays in human spirituality and moral development. Panentheism affirms the creation as a sacramental cathedral – the house of God. Surely that has value worth saving.

Panentheism, then, is a spiritual complement to ecology that gives deeper meaning and broader scope to human moral agency. It encourages us today to believe that when Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me," (Matthew 25:40, NRSV) he was including, as our responsibility, compassionate care for "Sister Earth, our Mother, Who nourishes and gives us food and fodder, And the green grass and flowers of every colour," and care for all the other "brothers and sisters" mentioned by Francis of Assisi in his Canticle of Creatures, such as air and water and "all Thy works whate'er they be (Armstrong 1973, 228)."

### III. Redemption

Jay McDaniel explains, “What spawns the hope for life after death is not a desire for immortality but rather a recognition that so many lives – indeed, the vast majority – end in incompleteness (Mc Daniel 1989, 46).” McDaniel speaks generally of a goal of “shalom” for life. Simply defined, shalom is the “peace of God” and implies God-given vision and intent. One important characteristic of shalom is reverence for life by human beings. In *Of God And Pelicans*,

McDaniel tries to explain how some of the apparent harshness and cruelty of nature can be reconciled as inherent to shalom and worthy of reverence. This is the challenge of “backup” pelican chicks, which are seemingly redundant and expendable, and usually die young. The relationship of things to God is particularly important for the vision of shalom in that it imputes the ability for all living things to contribute positively to God’s own experience of creation. He notes that even a tragic life may contribute something to God (*Ibid.* 43). With respect to the young pelicans and all life, McDaniel believes in the possibility of redemption as a transformation of life into a better state (an afterlife) where all things experience the fulfillment that each thing yearns for in this life in its own way (its own *telos*, referring back to Aquinas), but which frequently is not attained. With respect to a vision of what ought to be on planet earth, McDaniel is able to accept nature as it exists without human interference. God created it good and we should not think of ourselves as needing to improve it. Nature can be part of God’s shalom just as God created it because of the possibility of an otherworldly redemption.

Yet in an eco-Christian view, redemption is seen as more than a hoped-for afterlife. Here and now, God empowers us to eliminate attitudes, institutions, conditions, and thoughts that harbor and produce sin and unnecessary suffering, or that thwart the God-given *telos* of creation to “be fruitful and multiply.” Redemption, therefore, is more than the individual forgiveness so frequently spoken of as salvation; it is the compassion and challenge to interactively heal broken relationships that oppress people, ruin ecosystems, and threaten the survival of otherkind. Redemption in the ecological crisis is to: 1) reclaim the sacred or “enchanting” value of nature, as alluded to by Cusa and others; and 2) relieve the stress in which “the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain,” (Romans 8:22, King James Version) especially the stress we have created through acts of selfishness, injustice, and irreverence. John Hart summarizes it nicely in *Sacramental Commons*: “Ecojustice is the act of linking responsibility for the natural world, engendered by engagement with the Spirit, with responsibility for the neighbor, as required by Jesus as the Son of Man present among the ‘least brethren’ (Hart 2006, 66). ”

Eco-Christianity articulates a vision for a *redeemed* world that requires human *responsibility* in its emergence, which cannot happen without understanding the degree to which all creation is causally and dynamically *related* as a web of life created by God and in which the Creator God is present with good intentions. These elements of soteriology (redemption), ethics (responsibility), and ontology (relatedness as divine intent) are the cornerstones of eco-Christianity. With them as backdrop, I now show how eco-Buddhism can also be described using this three-fold construct.

## Eco-Buddhism

### I. Relatedness

In *The Sun My Heart*, the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh speaks of “interbeing endlessly interwoven,” and literally marvels at the interrelatedness of the universe. He says “there is no phenomenon in the universe that does not intimately concern us, from a pebble

resting at the bottom of the ocean, to the movement of a galaxy millions of light years away (Nhat Hanh 2000, 84).” Nhat Hanh is keenly aware of the science of life, cosmology, ecology, and evolution, noting that the principle of interbeing “is not just Buddhist, it is scientific (Ibid. 85).”

Interbeing, then, draws out some disagreement between the modern understanding of the human self and the teachings of the Buddha about the human as non-self. In *The Concepts of Self, Person, and I*, David Galin says that western psychology has mistakenly “come to see the self as a bounded persisting entity rather than as a dynamic open network of relationships (Galin 2003, 108).” The very notion of an independent or inherent self is mistaken, according to much of Buddhist thought, which asserts that a self cannot exist objectively and independently of everything else, as evidenced by this somewhat esoteric summary statement by Galin:

A person is a dynamically changing, self-organizing, multilevel, quasi entity without sharp boundaries, and embedded in a causal thicket; self is the current organization of the person; and I is the self’s point of view, its set of currently possible discriminations (Ibid. 136).

This statement is akin to that of Muir, in which he describes “whirling and flowing” nature “chasing everything in endless song out of one beautiful form into another.” Galin asserts that “Buddhist tradition holds that the root cause of suffering is the Ordinary Man’s erroneous view of self as an unchanging essence (Ibid. 107).” The Buddhist concept of the relational non-self is consistent with the emerging ecological way of viewing reality.

Ecology has been taken up by Asian and western Buddhists alike for its value to eco-Buddhism. In *The Hermeneutics of Buddhist Ecology in Contemporary Thailand*, Donald Swearer notes the teaching of Thai Buddhist Buddhadasa Bhikku that our “... own personal well-being is inextricably dependent on the well-being of everything else, and vice versa (1997, 29).” The teachings of Buddhadasa define this interrelatedness or dependency in traditional Buddhist language and doctrine. Buddhadasa identifies nature with the *dhamma* and says the “lessons nature teaches us lead to a new birth beyond the suffering [*dukkha*] that results from attachment to self (Ibid. 25).” So, Buddhadasa brings together the ecological interrelatedness of nature, the teachings of the Buddha, and enlightenment: an integration aptly described by Swearer as “the ontological realization of interdependent co-arising (Ibid. 29).” This is interrelationship at the core.

Modern eco-Buddhism, therefore, integrates two kinds of interrelatedness: ontological and ecological. For example, ontological beliefs such as interdependent co-arising, karma, non-self, and emptiness were not inspired by understandings of ecological science. They are consistent with the Four Noble Truths arising out of the Buddha’s quest for freedom from suffering and attainment of enlightenment. These beliefs are of an ontological nature pursuant to freedom from rebirth and the attainment of nirvana. Absent the contemporary context of the ecological crisis, these ontological beliefs are substantially about freedom from undue attachment to ultimately “empty, impermanent” nature. In other words, these ontological beliefs lead to recognizing the

unsatisfying attachment to impermanent things and, in a manner consistent with the middle way, regulating those attachments in accordance with the *dhamma* so as to create karma in hope of enlightenment and at least rebirth to a better state. Historically, this ontology did not result in an environmental ethic applicable to the contemporary ecological crisis because it was not ultimately focused on “conventional existence,” a term that is important to a Buddhist worldview. Alan Wallace describes conventional existence this way:

All phenomena are found to exist as dependently related events, “empty” of any intrinsic identity of their own. In this view both subjective and objective phenomena have only a conventional existence, relative to the mind that perceives or conceives them (Wallace 2003, 283).

Even though all phenomena are “empty” and reduce, in some way, to an ontological oneness, Buddhism accepts that we experience conventional existence, however impermanent it may ultimately be. It is within this realm of conventional existence that life is karmic. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century context of the ecological crisis, eco-Buddhism draws on ecological interrelatedness as a conventional material world corollary to underlying ontological reality. The net effect of this integration of ecological and ontological relatedness is summarized by Ruben Habito who, writing from a Zen perspective, speaks of a mindfulness in which the “Zen practitioner is able to gather together the disparate elements of one’s life and achieve ever greater integration (Habito 1997, 168).” This proceeds to an “awakening to one’s true self” where dualisms disappear and one is aware of “seeing and relating to everything in the universe (Ibid. 168).”

Eco-Buddhism offers a doctrine of ontological oneness that merges with ecology to provide a highly complex perspective of existence as causal, dynamic, and karmic. By acknowledging nature and its dynamic ecology as a place for mindfulness and action, eco-Buddhism offers a basis for human responsibility in an age of ecological crisis.

## II. Responsibility

Ecological interrelatedness is the basis for examining one’s impacts on nature, while nature’s ontological value as *dhamma* and partner in enlightenment speaks to the karma of impacts. Swearer says that “Buddhadasa’s biocentric ontology can be interpreted deontologically, or, as Buddhadasa phrases it, nature implies certain moral maxims or duties (Swearer 1997, 39).” One such way this plays out is against the backdrop of suffering and the Four Noble Truths which, summarized by Donald Rothberg, teach us “...that there is profound suffering or unsatisfactoriness in life; that the roots of such suffering are in greed, hatred, and delusion; that it is possible to end suffering, to uproot greed, hatred, and delusion; and that there are clear, practical ways to transform suffering through and into wisdom and love (2001, 162).” Therefore, one ought to act in such a way as to not create more suffering and, to every extent possible, alleviate suffering for all things. This translates into an ethic of compassion, which Thich Nhat

Hanh defines as “a mind that removes the suffering that is present in the other (Nhat Hanh 1991, 81).”

William Ames speaks of the nature and role of compassion in Mahayana Buddhism:

Mahayana has its own characteristic emphasis on universal compassion, which aims to liberate all sentient beings from suffering, and on wisdom, which comprehends the emptiness of all phenomena. The Mahayana ideal is exemplified by the bodhisattva, who, motivated by compassion, seeks to perfect wisdom and skillful means in order to attain complete enlightenment for the benefit of all beings (Ames 2003, 298).

To understand this statement, it is important to remember that when Ames says wisdom “comprehends the emptiness of all phenomena,” he could just as easily have said that wisdom “comprehends the nature of interdependent co-arising.” These two definitions are two sides of the same “*dhammic coin*.” Emptiness means that nothing stands alone and goes it alone. All things are “empty” in that sense; rather, all things “arise” interdependently. Therefore, eco-Buddhism defines compassion as the ethic for interrelatedness, and it seeks to remove suffering.

Nevertheless, one does not easily find a “skillful means” prescription for responsible eco-Buddhist behavior. For example, the Four Noble Truths address suffering that is rooted in human greed, hatred, and delusion. Good karma is behavior that leads to greater and greater freedom from greed, hatred, delusion, and suffering. One’s behavior in Buddhist life grows out of the desire for freedom from rebirth and the attainment of enlightenment. With respect to suffering as *dukkha*, in what way does that kind of suffering exist in non-human nature? Only human beings are greedy, hateful, and deluded. That can certainly have consequences for how human actions will impact nature and cause suffering, but non-human nature itself (sentient and non-sentient) is not greedy, hateful, and deluded in the sense of the Four Noble Truths. And yet, even absent the impacts of human behavior, we say there is suffering in nature, such as the pelican chick. So a purely deontological approach to nature, rooted in a desire to minimize and ultimately escape suffering brought on by human attachment to things (*dukkha*), is only a partial approach to caring for nature in which there is suffering that is not easily understood as *dukkha*.

Eco-Buddhism, like eco-Christianity, is revisiting, revising, and reinterpreting its tradition in order to enable responsible judgments with respect to diverse, oftentimes competing entities. The incorporation of “rights” into Buddhist thought is an example. Damien Keown concludes that “in classical Buddhism the notion of rights is present in embryonic form although not yet born into history (Keown 2000, 64).” However, with respect to “giving birth” to the notion today, Keown says “the most promising approach will be one which locates human rights and dignity within a comprehensive account of human goodness, and which sees basic rights and freedoms as integrally related to human flourishing and self-realization (Ibid. 70).” He incorporates this into the human ability to live up to the third and fourth Noble Truths, which he interprets as revealing the “literally infinite capacity of human nature for participation in goodness (Ibid. 71).” The practical value of human rights is one of empowering human goodness

to discern at least relative right and wrong between people and establishing justice within human relationships. More explicitly environmental in tone is the emergence of animal rights as a guide to responsible eco-Buddhism. Traditional challenges to animal rights by Buddhism are the bad karma associated with animals and brief history of interpreting care for animals as meritorious in the sense of good karma. However, Paul Waldau suggests that these challenges are not insurmountable, noting that “a desire to be informed so as to act responsibly leads one to assess the consequences of one’s actions, and this could in turn have led to inquiries about the nature and complexities of the living beings affected by human action (Waldau 2000, 100).” Waldau believes that through a reexamination of the Buddhist tradition today within the context of the ecological crisis, this “desire to be informed so as to act responsibly” is supporting an ethic of animal rights founded upon: the precept against killing; a concern for the consequences of one’s actions on the non-human animal world; and an examination of the actual complexities and distinctions in the realm of non-human animal life that have never been acknowledged in Buddhism but are now the focus of modern ecology.

That is an initial look at the responsibility of eco-Buddhism. It is engaged in a dialogue to bring together seemingly disparate concepts, such as non-duality (an ontological concept) and unity-in-diversity (an ecological concept), into an ethic of compassion for the entities and life of the conventional world.

### III. Redemption

Action to stop the ecological crisis is implicitly goal-seeking, the goal being an end to the crisis and a way of living that avoids such a crisis for the foreseeable future. All goal-seeking behavior includes an existing condition and a desired condition. Together these motivate and give direction to redemption.

The modern religious response to the ecological crisis teaches that an awakening (or reawakening) to space as holy ground would help create the desired condition and sustain a proper ethic toward the environment. Be it eco-Christianity or eco-Buddhism, the argument is that a sense of the sacred in nature would promote reverent regard for natural things, including non-human life, leading to compassionate, sustainable use of the earth. The ecological crisis challenges us to connect ontological truth with responsibility toward conventional symbols of ontological truth, meaning everything in the world.

Don Swearer describes Buddhadasa’s practice as bio-centric: “...listening to nature and caring for nature are both forms of *dhammic* self-forgetting, not merely instrumental to human flourishing (Swearer 1997, 28).” While not describing a vision per se, this view shows a regard for nature as holy or reverent, which easily speaks for a vision in which plunder and exploitation do not exist.

In *Nuclear Ecology and Engaged Buddhism*, Ken Kraft speaks of animals, plants, and the whole earth having eco-karma (Kraft 2000, 278-9). The soteriology of enlightenment and its possible attainment by all beings leads to a regard for all life as part of the religious community or *sangha*. Even if enlightenment ultimately transcends the natural world (as with the Christian

after-life), whole-earth karma mitigates against individualism and implicitly supports a vision of mutuality in the here and now supported by appropriate ethical regard and virtue. This plays out in a manner fully informed by ecology and the needs of healthy ecosystems since, in the words of Rita Gross, interdependence is “one of the most basic teachings of Buddhism (Gross 2000, 295).”

I have presented two potentially important influences on an eco-Buddhist vision for nature: 1) nature as *dhamma*, specifically teaching the transparency of ontological truth in ecology; and 2) whole-earth karma with the possibility of universal enlightenment. These are substantive elements for a compelling vision of nature in an age of ecological crisis. This is not to say that “*dhamma* as nature and whole-earth karma with the possibility for universal enlightenment” easily translate into such a vision. Though still an emerging ideology, eco-Buddhism is a call to live gently, interdependently, sustainably, and sufficiently. That, in itself, is a redemptive vision.

As with eco-Christianity, eco-Buddhism reveals the perennial religious struggle to bring spirituality to bear in the lived context, which is always changing; or, put another way, to bring the ontological to bear in the ever-changing conventional world. This is the struggle to be neither too worldly nor too otherworldly; to be both non-monist and non-dualist; to follow the middle way. Inspired by the *dhamma* of nature, whole-earth karma, and the prospect for universal enlightenment, eco-Buddhism seeks greater integration between ontological oneness and ecological connectedness in order to promote ecological health and sustainability through skillful, compassionate living in a conventional world.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, there is important common ground between eco-Buddhism and eco-Christianity. One such element is that both seek to justify themselves within the context of their own complex histories and traditions. Eco-religiosity is only emerging – not fully developed or widely expressed in the teachings and practices of the mainstream. However, in a world community that looks for faith communities to offer hope and guidance during times of crisis, both eco-Christianity and eco-Buddhism can proclaim a common message of relatedness, responsibility, and redemption. They acknowledge a *relatedness* of all material or conventional life that is ecological and ontological. There is a oneness that is absolute, which is both the source and goal of all ecological diversity. There is suffering in life: suffering inherent to a diverse, dynamic “living world;” but, also, suffering that is a consequence of human action. The human *responsibility* affirmed by both eco-Buddhism and eco-Christianity to address such consequent suffering is broad in scope, deeply compassionate, and salvific. Both believe in a *redemption* that is transcendent and yet is perceived and manifested through immanence, be it *dhammic* or divine, that guides practical behavior and has practical outcomes.

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## Post-Pluralism Through the Lens of Post-Modernity

By Aimee Upjohn Light

### Abstract

This article briefly describes the state of Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue, arguing that Jacques Dupuis's and S. Mark Heim's Trinitarian approaches would benefit greatly from inhabiting the self-consciousness generated by post-modernity. In particular, understanding absolute claims as constructed within discourse gives rise to humility—surely the best attitude for dialogue with the religious other. In the wake of pluralism's incoherence, what we need to do is not merely give our inclusivisms a new twist, but re-frame them within post-modernity's refusal to think in dual categories. When we overcome what seems to be our natural tendency to think in terms of either/or, presence/absence, and value/devalued, we become open to the experience of the religious other on her own terms. She then becomes not other, but neighbor.

While there is work being done by theologians in the space of post-modernity – the era in which we operate with suspicion and skepticism about the objective or absolute nature of our truth claims – such theologians frequently fail to acknowledge that we live in another “post-” era: post-pluralism. The post-pluralist world is that created by the demise of the pluralist hypothesis and the problems facing authors who follow in its wake. Pluralism claimed to represent all the religions by suggesting the existence of a religious object behind “God,” “Yahweh,” “Allah,” “Brahman” and so forth, but pluralism is now seen to *misrepresent* the religions by positing a religious object which is other than what Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists take themselves to be worshipping or in relationship with. Worse, pluralism claimed to affirm the truth of multiple religions, but instead affirms only itself as the correct metaphysical worldview—the one beyond Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Invariably, authors following in pluralism’s wake have retreated into forms of inclusivism, the position which maintains the truth and superiority of one’s own beliefs but which holds that others are in relationship with one’s own religious object and will attain the specified religious end. These authors always give inclusivism a creative twist in an attempt to go beyond inclusivism’s limitations of taking the non-Christian to be doing other than what she takes herself to be doing, and claiming superiority both in terms of Christian revelation and, sometimes, the salvation status of Christians over members of other traditions. Each of these new inclusivist positions has proven highly unsatisfactory. Yet, just as post-modern theologians have failed to take account of the post-pluralist conversation, post-pluralist theologians have failed to make use of post-modernity. This is exactly what authors like Jacques Dupuis<sup>1</sup> and S. Mark Heim<sup>2</sup> need in order to unproblematically put forth some form of the inclusivist position. This article will briefly describe the problems which these post-pluralist theologies face, and argue that any attempt at a new inclusivism in the post-pluralist world needs to make use of the category of

post-modernity—applying the attitude of suspicion to our supposedly universal, absolute and exclusionary truth claims. Inter-religious dialogue as engaged in by Christians ought to exploit the new, non-binary ways of thinking created by this rupture in our categories of thought – ways of thinking which seek to overcome the world seen in dualities like presence/absence, same/different and value/devalued. In a non-dual world, that which is different may augment rather than threaten our unitary religious narrative.

Though at first Jacques Dupuis's *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* and S. Mark Heim's *The Depths of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* look like very different projects, they are methodologically very similar. Both retreat—or are on their way to retreating—into a Christian inclusivism. Both use a person of the Trinity to make their escape from charges of self-superiority, including non-Christians in God's saving plan through some aspect of God's nature. Dupuis uses the Holy Spirit yet prioritizes the pre-incarnation Trinity by ultimately separating the logos<sup>3</sup> from the person of Jesus. Heim uses the Holy Spirit as well, to put forth the novel thesis that non-Christians get the ends that they desire because of the relational nature of the Trinity. Yet Heim is then faced with normativizing<sup>4</sup> the Christian end instead of the Christian religion.

Such is the state of Christian theology of religions today. Riding the tension between the desire and necessity of affirming the value of the religious other and her teachings and the need to affirm what we believe to the exclusion of what seems incommensurate, we search for features in our own tradition which seem to open the possibility of the real contribution of non-Christian religions.

The search is futile as long as we inhabit the modernist, dichotomous discourse in which what is known is known “binarily” in terms of presence and absence. Just as we think of an object as either existing fully or not existing at all, we think that if God is present in one tradition, God cannot be present in other traditions. To give an example, an object either exists in full or doesn’t. As open as Christianity’s doctrine of the Holy Spirit is to its presence in multiple religious traditions, Dupuis is faced with either dispensing with the necessity of Christ or claiming the rightness of his own metaphysics. Similarly, Heim cannot help but rank the fullness of multiple religious ends allowed for by the Trinity, because union with God as conceived of by Christians is still the best reflection of that for which we were created. In a binary, dichotomous metaphysic, what is other must always be identified as a lack.

The limitations of inclusivism are real, but due not to inclusivism itself but the dualistic conversation it inhabits in which God is either fully present or fully absent. Inclusivism does make possible the positive valuation of the religious other and her tradition, but always through recourse to the truth of our own beliefs to avoid the logical incoherence of pluralism. The Jew or Hindu, for instance, attains salvation because her beliefs are monotheistic like ours, or she follows the ethical mandate not to kill, which is part of our ten commandments.<sup>5</sup> The person who belongs to a religion other than our own, and that religion itself, may have value, but only insofar as she and it mirror our own beliefs and/or ways of life. What inclusivisms in a post-pluralist world need is not a doctrine-infused twist within the dualist nature of modernist “knowing.” This move will always result in recreating the limitations of inclusivism that we are frustrated with. Instead,

putting forth the inclusivist position requires the new, self-critical attitude towards speech and knowledge, which we get from postmodernity.

By adopting a post-modern, deconstructionist hermeneutic in which we are self-critical and suspicious of claims to universality and objectivity, we consciously reject our intellectual dualist heritage. We understand our Western and especially Christian narrative for what it is: a worldview created in what *appears* to be the only way of thinking – thinking in categories of either/or, presence/absence and value/devalued. This way of thinking appeared so natural, so necessary, that we took it to be the way things really are. Yet when we admit even the possibility of a non-binary universe, where shades of existence can take form, we immediately see that this dual way of approaching the world is just that: a way of approaching the world. If we dispense with this constructed understanding of our thought, we are then free to enter into non-binary discourse. The “problem” of the religious other may then be seen for what it is, namely, the result of our dichotomous structures of thought, not the way the world necessarily is.

Instead of tackling the project of overcoming difference, in post-modernity we are now free to start with our experience of our religious neighbor as an absolute demand for ethical treatment. Given her witness of an ethically engaged life, participation in ritual and witness to spiritual experience, we may now come to abide by the subject’s claim on us as “person” rather than enslave ourselves to binary oppositions in which the other must, always and everywhere, serve in the role of absence to our presence. The rightness of our metaphysics and ways of life no longer has to signify the wrongness of what is different and the consequent devaluation of persons who believe differently than we do.

In the face of a subjective point of view, which gives rise to claims which appear different than our own, however, we must still speak. Our differences continue to appear real, but this no longer necessitates the positing of absolute or semi-absolute judgments. Instead, we may, and must, engage in the disruption that the demand of our neighbor as person poses to our unitary narrative. As soon as we understand her as a human being whose value is absolute, the value of any worldview that claims universal authority but excludes the other comes into question. Far from prioritizing our philosophical structures, we may admit their destabilization by the presence of she who was thought to embody absence.

For those of us who are Christians—or indeed persons committed to any religious system—we still need to speak. Our vision of the world claims us and demands a claim on others. Yet, in asserting our beliefs, we must now be self-scrutinizing and tentative, and hold them alongside and in tension with the critiques of post-structuralism and post-modernity. We may continue to espouse inclusivism, but only with the consciousness that our binary systems are a product of the logocentric Western mind, a mind that is searching for meaning in a transcendent word, put in opposition to the world. We then re-inscribe the logic of opposition in our knowledge of difference. Inclusivism then becomes our most consistent option, but only as a temporary measure in our struggle to identify the fissures in our homogeneous thought.

In the end, post-modernism functions much as the eschaton<sup>6</sup> does in our Christian thought. It is a hoped for, yet much feared, development in history, which seeks to overcome

our particularity and unjust, exclusionary power structures. It seeks to render visible fissures and gaps and entire segments of the world made invisible by exclusion. In the face of these visions, anything we say must be acknowledged as partial, and as serving a finite, fallen agenda. If we function in the space of post-modernity, putting forth inclusivism as only a momentary measure, we may in reality better serve the coming of God's kingdom, which we take, in a cautious way, as our absolute goal.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Dupuis is a Belgian Jesuit priest who worked for years in India, and for whom the question of whether salvation is necessarily mediated by Jesus Christ and possibly the Church necessarily arose from his experience of religious multiplicity. See his *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*.

<sup>2</sup> See S. Mark Heim's *The Depths of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* which is an ingenious use of the relational nature of the Christian Trinity as the very basis for persons obtaining multiple religious ends—Nirvana, Moksha, union with Allah etc.

<sup>3</sup> The *logos* in Christian theology simply means the person of the Trinity who becomes incarnate. Yet it is important to ensure the self-identity of the *logos* and Jesus, otherwise there would be four persons of the Trinity! The point is that the way God exists before God incarnates God's self is one with the way God exists during and after the incarnation. The *logos* is the way to speak of the person of Jesus before the incarnation. For those readers who are unfamiliar with Christian teachings on the Trinity and for whom the concept seems absurd, it may be especially helpful to start with recent scholarship which points out that the doctrine of the Trinity is not about number, but about God's relationality. To be God is to be-in-relation. Teachings about the Trinity are attempts to articulate this relational understanding of the very being of God. This is the overarching point made throughout Catherine Mowry Lacugna's groundbreaking book *God For Us*. Many Christians would do well to study the significance of Trinitarian theology as well, for the Trinity has—for some—come to signify three persons in the sense of three identities. This was never what was intended by the Greek Fathers.

<sup>4</sup> To clarify, when we “normativize” something, we make it absolute. We give it priority, special status or unique relevance. We make it the standard for judging things similar in category.

<sup>5</sup> I am using the language “our ten commandments” writing as a Christian, but of course the ten commandments were given to the Israelites long before one might have suggested they were Christian. Even the understanding of Christianity as a descendent of Judaism could not have arisen without the beginning of the sensibility that “we versus them” thinking is problematic. The point is simply that inclusivism holds that members of traditions which differ from one's own are in relation to one's own religious object (in this case God) and may attain the religious end specified by one's own tradition, and that this occurs because of overlap between the systems—either in terms of beliefs or ethics.

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<sup>6</sup> In Christianity, *eschaton* means the second coming of Jesus and “the end of the world as we know it” — a phrase which R.E.M. made a part of our cultural landscape whether one knew it to be of Christian significance or not.

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## Satyagraha and Reconciliation

By Sharon Tan

### Abstract

This paper compares elements from the Christian notion of reconciliation and Gandhi's notion of *satyagraha*. Both Gandhi's work toward liberation and self-rule, *moksha* and *swaraj* respectively, and reconciliation, or forgiveness and renewed relationship, work against oppression and injustice and toward bringing about the conflict transformation and the desired state of relationships. Both assume a moral agency of the victim and impose a moral duty on the victim. There are also differences, notably as to the possible use of violence: nonviolent action is the basis of *satyagraha*, but there is no absolute prohibition of physical force or coercion in reconciliation.

### Introduction

In an era when the influence of religion and politics on each other is the constant subject of news and scholarship, there needs to be a renewed interest in how this influence can build a more just and less violent world. There are two ethics, reconciliation in Christianity, and Gandhi's notion of *satyagraha*, which promise just that. There are similarities between *satyagraha*, Gandhi's work toward liberation and self-rule, *moksha* and *swaraj* respectively, and concepts of reconciliation. Both work against oppression and injustice, and toward bringing about the conflict transformation and the desired state of relationships. Both assume the moral agency of the victim, and impose a moral duty on the victim. There is a difference as to the possible use of violence: nonviolent action is the basis of *satyagraha*, while the absolute prohibition of physical force is not always perceived as an essential element of reconciliation.

This paper discusses some of the similarities and dissimilarities between *satyagraha* and reconciliation, with regard to the moral agency and responsibility of the victim in 1) the aims of reconciliation and *satyagraha*, and 2) the method of action.

### Definitions and Background

#### I. *Satyagraha*:

The term *satyagraha* is literally “holding on to Truth” or “truth-force.” *Satya* is the term for truth, or absolute being. *Agraha* is the term for holding fast, adherence, or insistence. Therefore the compound word denotes clinging to truth, holding fast to truth, or insistence on truth. “*Satyagraha* is not predominantly civil disobedience, but a quiet and irresistible pursuit of truth” (Gandhi 1945, 498-499).

Although truth is absolute, humans only have a relative knowledge of it. Because we are not capable of knowing the absolute truth, we cannot use violence against those who disagree or differ with us. The discovery of truth is only through non-violence (Gandhi 1951,3; Bondurant 1969, 31-32). Therefore, the second principle of *satyagraha* is *ahimsa* or non-violence. *Ahimsa* is action based on the refusal to do harm (Bondurant 1969, 23). It is the method of testing truth, and is thus the supreme ethical value, and the means to knowing God (Ibid. 25,20).

The third principle of *satyagraha* is suffering, or *tapasya*. *Tapas* is the notion of religious austerity in Hindu scriptures, or of bodily mortification or penance and is identified with renunciation (Ibid.. 114). Gandhi brought it into the social and political sphere (Ibid. 114). “Nonviolence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean meek submission to the will of the evil-doer, but it means the pitting of one’s whole soul against the will of the tyrant” (Gandhi 1920).

*Satyagraha*, or nonviolent action, is action in accordance with principles of non-violence. There are three stages of action in *satyagraha*: 1) persuasion through reason, 2) persuasion through suffering, 3) nonviolent coercion (Bondurant 1969, 11).

## II. Reconciliation

Although religion can inspire violence, it also can inspire peace-making and peace-building.<sup>1</sup> The notion of reconciliation, the rebuilding of just and peaceful relationships after a breach, has deep roots in Christian theology. The Christian scriptures enjoin believers to be reconcilers because of God’s own love and reconciliation with humankind.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Robert J. Schreiter calls reconciliation central to the Christian message (Schreiter 1999; see also Lederach 1999). This has political and social, as well as personal religious implications: for example, Desmond Tutu argues in *No Future Without Forgiveness* that the inspiration for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa was based both in Christianity and the African notion of *ubuntu*, common humanity (1999).

The process of reconciliation after an offense consists of forgiveness by the victim, repentance by the offender, and a renewal of relationship between the parties on a just basis. The process of reconciliation is not necessarily a linear, ordered one, but all elements must occur in some form, sometimes hand in hand, and sometimes over a period of time, and the different elements must occur at the different levels of social, political and interpersonal relationships.

The process of *political reconciliation* consists of conflict transformation, or conflict management informed by political forgiveness, and democratic constitutionalism that incorporates justice in its various expressions. Donald Shriver posits that forgiveness in the corporate context, is thus: 1) to rehearse and give a moral judgment of the wrong, injustice and injury, recognizing that wrongs could be bi- or multi-lateral; 2) to abandon the idea of vengeance; 3) to have empathy for the enemy and recognize its humanity; 4) to aim at the renewal of human relationship. Political forgiveness is both a process and an act that joins a declaration of moral truth, forbearance, empathy, and a commitment to repair fractured human relationships. It is a

collective turning from the past that does not ignore or excuse past evil or overlook justice (Shriver 1995, 7-9).

Forgiveness is possibly the most controversial element of reconciliation. Forgiveness, or the release of moral debt, stands in tension with the need and desire for justice, and thus is conceived by some as in tension with liberation. To overcome this tension, some expand the notion of forgiveness to incorporate justice. For example, Jon Sobrino argues that forgiveness entails forgiveness both of the sin, or sinful reality, and of the sinner. Forgiveness of the sinner is an act of love that converts the sinner, doing good where there is evil and transforming evil into good. To forgive sinful reality is to eradicate it by bearing its weight in love and solidarity with the poor (Sobrino 1994, 58-64).<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Miroslav Volf expresses reluctance to use the terminology of liberation theology in discussions of reconciliation, arguing that the dichotomy between oppressed and oppressor is not helpful for reconciliation, as in many instances the liberated become the oppressed (Volf 2000, 104.) Rather, we should liberate not for freedom as the ultimate goal, but for the sake of reconciliation, for what he calls the “kingdom of embrace” (Ibid. 104-5)<sup>4</sup>

I suggest that reconciliation incorporates *both* the need for forgiveness and for justice. Forgiveness by a victim is essential for the liberation of the inner self and for the rebuilding of relationship, but not sufficient by itself. The corresponding moral action by the offender, repentance, is essential for establishing justice and the liberation of society. Only with all these elements can there be true reconciliation.

### III. The Moral Agency of the Victim in Satyagraha and Reconciliation

Both reconciliation and *satyagraha* hold both the victim and the offender responsible to work toward justice, liberation, and reconciliation. There is an argument that the victim has been the one to suffer, and to add moral responsibility to the victim to do something about it is to add insult to injury. We should instead focus on changing the offender, or the offending structure, and on the offender’s duty to cease offending.

While all this is certainly true, having an offense committed against oneself does not eradicate one’s moral agency, and with that agency comes a responsibility. In Christian theology, the moral responsibility of the victim is forgiveness, and openness to reconciliation, which in turn implies actively working toward justice and liberation (Sobrino 1994, 65). Likewise, the imperative or duty of *satyagraha* is work by the oppressed toward *moksha*, or liberation, and *swaraj*, or self-rule. Gandhi conceived of these in terms of just relationships, thus in similar terms to the discussion of reconciliation above. *Ahimsa* and non-violence is not passivity, but an active duty required of one who is capable and strong. “The first principle of non-violent action is that of non-cooperation with everything humiliating” (Gandhi 1948 vol. II, 53).

Cowardice and ahimsa do not go together any more than water and fire . . . .  
Nonviolence is not a cover for cowardice, but it is the supreme virtue of the brave.  
Exercise of nonviolence requires far greater bravery than that of swordsmanship.

Cowardice is wholly inconsistent with nonviolence. It (nonviolence) is a conscious deliberate restraint put upon one's desire for vengeance (Gandhi 1948 vol. I, 243, 59-60; Helmick 2001, 310).

Thus, the moral agency of the victim of oppression is to be active, courageous, and to work toward justice and reconciliation.

## The Aim of Reconciliation

### I. The Search for Truth

The moral responsibility to work toward reconciliation involves the notion of “truth.” Both *satyagraha* and political forgiveness involve the search for Truth, but this pursuit takes on different connotations in *satyagraha*. For the *satyagrahi*, the phrase “Truth is God” is an ontological statement (Merton 1964, 28; I-414). *Sat* is being, that which exists. *Satya* means that which is in accordance with *Sat* or being, that is, truth. God is, nothing else is (Diwakar 1948, 1). Truth is the absolute principle by which we align our lives. When Gandhi made the pursuit of *satya* an ethical concern, the effect was to transform the absolute or philosophical truth of *Sat* to the relative or practical truth of action (Bonduant 1969, 108-11). Thus, *ahimsa* is not only about the strength and courage to suffer without retaliation, but also about speaking out the whole truth and acting accordingly (Merton 1968, 58; II-57).

In political forgiveness, the concept of truth is generally more historical and utilitarian. It comes as part of “moral accounting” or “truth telling” that establishes the historical and moral nature of the wrong. Forgiveness, and thus reconciliation, requires the recognition of differences in culture and understanding of certain events, and the need for telling one’s truth and story (Villa-Vicencio 1997, 30-40). Truth is at least the minimum, and even perhaps the key political mandate for a society (Henkin 1995, 186; Kritz 1995, 491). It legitimizes a government’s actions about past offenses (Kritz 1995). It is the basis of justice – a society purporting to be democratic and thus representing the different groups cannot misrepresent any aspect of its people’s experience (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1995, 57).

### II. The Work toward Liberation

Both *satyagraha* and political forgiveness include the victim in the work toward liberation. *Satyagraha* is the work toward *swaraj* and *moksha*. *Swaraj*, or self-rule, was first a moral and personal understanding, which Gandhi imbued with a political connotation. Thus, it came to mean both personal discipline and self government in India (Merton 1964, 5). It is linked with *moksha*, or the liberation of the self from cycles of suffering that Gandhi extended to mean the liberation of India. Liberation of India thus became a religious duty, and the liberation of India was a step toward the liberation of humankind from violence, both from others and themselves (Ibid., 7). Gandhi aimed at three kinds of liberation: 1) to deliver Indian religious

wisdom from blindness to injustices; 2) to liberate the Harijan or Dalit (“outcasts”) from political and economic oppression and from their own self-hate and despair; and 3) to liberate oppressors from their blind and hopeless dependence on the system of oppression (Ibid., 16).

Sobrino sees forgiveness as liberation from the lie about ourselves. Forgiveness delivers us from ourselves, and our own truths, and liberates us to recognize God as God actually is. It is not for liberation from the lie that we need forgiveness, and God has not forgiven us. Rather, forgiveness is knowledge of the truth about the nature of ourselves (Sobrino 1994, 93).

Forgiveness also liberates us from social segregation and humiliation, in as much as it sparks change in the other. First, the forgiven person becomes a forgiving one, loved in order to love. Second, more generally, forgiveness sets a person free to express God’s love with regard to the world. Liberation from one’s personal sin leads one to express and embody to others the love of God that has been experienced. In other words, personal forgiveness leads to liberation praxis in order to take focus off oneself; gratitude from being forgiven leads to the practice of mercy (Sobrino 1994, 67,96).

### III. The Work Toward Rebuilding Community

The aims of both *satyagraha* and reconciliation are not only liberation or freedom, but the ultimate goal of renewed or rebuilt community and relationship on a just basis. As stated before, Volf argues that liberation in itself is insufficient; there needs to be reconciliation in the community and the transformation of persons. The purpose of liberation is a just and loving society for all (Merton 1964, 28, II-8). Gandhi says the same: “A non-violent revolution is not a program of seizure of power. It is a program of transformation of relationships, ending in a peaceful transfer of power” (Ibid., 28, II-8).

I suggest that the political expression of community is constitutional democracy. Thus, Gandhi saw democratic government as the outcome of non-violence. “Not all legislation is violence. Legislation imposed by people upon themselves is non-violence to the extent that it is possible in society. . . . That state is perfect and non-violent where the people are governed the least” (Ibid., 54, I-292). In fact, he went further, stating that non-violence is a prerequisite to such a government. “Without the recognition for non-violence on a national scale there is not such thing as a constitutional or democratic government” (Ibid., 53, I-199).

### IV. Similarities and Dissimilarities in Method of Action

#### a. Nonviolence

Both reconciliation and *satyagraha* promote nonviolent action, which operates on the assumption that evil is reversible and can be changed into good, and that we can act accordingly. Reconciliation’s emphasis on forgiveness and repentance is aimed at overcoming the effects of evil on the human consciousness and moral action, and changing the cycles of violence and hatred that evil would perpetuate. Nonviolent action assumes that evil can be overcome by the truth that is born in the process, and the suffering that is undertaken by the actors.

Catholic theologian and monk Thomas Merton argues that modern tyrannies are built upon the assumption of the irreversibility of evil. When we see evil as clear-cut and irreversible, and thus externalize it, our only task is to eliminate it completely. Tyrannies are built on the idea there should never be sin or corruption within the community, and that we can and must eradicate it. For example, Hitler's Nazi Germany operated on this principle of the irreversibility and eradicability of the evil they saw in the Jews – hence the Nazis' unquestioning acceptance of the “Final Solution” and their unquestioning obedience toward their leaders. If evil is perceived as clear, unchanging and irreversible, opposition to evil must be absolute and thus even hesitation to commit violence against the undesired shows that one has already been contaminated by evil. On the other hand, only through our recognition that evil is common and everyday, and our recognition that there is defect and fallibility in our own selves can we become merciful to others. We can see the sin itself as the punishment or consequence, and thus have compassion on sinners. Instead of our eliminating or punishing them, we can see them as already undergoing punishment. We can then empathize with them, suffering their pain as if it were our own. This empathy enables us to be forgiving (Merton 1964, 12-14).

As sin is an everyday occurrence, humans need to be constantly forgiving and constantly releasing. In fact, society can only operate by this constant mutual release. (Bankruptcy laws are an example of a system of economic forgiveness, set up to enable people to take risks and innovate, and thereby enable the economy to function and grow). Nonviolence takes this constant change into account, seeking not to eliminate evil by force, but to change evil into good (Ibid., 14). For example, Gandhi stated that murder can never be avenged by either murder or financial compensation. The only way to avenge murder is to offer oneself as a willing sacrifice, with no desire for retaliation (Ibid., 49, II-131). Merton thus argues that there is an inherent relation between nonviolence and the renewal of India. Violent change would have only initiated a new cycle of violence and oppression. The only real liberation is that which liberates both the oppressor and oppressed at the same time from the tyrannical processes of vengeance, and this is forgiveness (Sobrino 1994, 65).

In some Christian liberation theologies, however, the myth of redemptive violence persists. Unlike Gandhi, Jon Sobrino does not specify non-violence as the only way to reflect forgiveness. Rather, he argues that to hate the sin is to eradicate it, “and objectively, this is a violent action against the sinner” (Ibid., 65). Love entails doing good where there is evil, transforming evil into good. There is possibly some coercion involved, and this includes the stance of knowing what is good for the sinner (Ibid., 63).

Sobrino argues that through love, we make it impossible for offenders to continue with their deeds, which dehumanize themselves and others. Liberation from oppression means destroying the person oppressing, “*in his formal capacity as oppressor*” (Sobrino 1994, 65). There is thus a limitation on the amount of destruction permissible. A tension exists between what are perceived as the needs of love, expressed in forgiveness, and of justice, expressed as destruction of the oppressor as oppressor. There is a tension between forgiving reality, and thus changing it, and forgiving the sinner (Ibid., 64). Sobrino argues that we integrate the tension between love and destruction with “great love” (Ibid., 65).

I suggest that there is a distinction between violence and force, violence being excessive or an intentionally destructive force, which is not warranted to procure justice or to prevent further harm. This leads to the question whether there can be force that is neither excessive in the attempt to reach a legitimate end, nor intentionally destructive, in the name of love, and thus consistent with reconciliation. There are an array of opinions in Christian theology as to the legitimate use of physical force, reflected in the historic debate between just war theory and pacifism (Cahill 1994). Related to this debate is the acceptance by theologians such as Martin Luther that police power, or legitimate state sanctioned force to control chaos and reduce evil and defend vulnerable persons, can be exercised in love. In light of this, one could argue that love would *limit* but not *prohibit* physical force, that is, love and thus reconciliation would limit force to legitimate police power and retributive punishment, or to just war, and nothing more.

Thus, perhaps some (but not all) of the difference between Christian reconciliation and *satyagraha* is semantic and positional. Both *satyagraha* and reconciliation eschew violence, that is, excessive and destructive force of any kind. *Satyagraha*, nonviolent action by those who are oppressed and do not have state authority to exercise police power, eschews all physical force. Reconciliation does not necessarily prohibit physical force in pursuit of justice. In addition, reconciliation can also include action when there is legitimate state sanction to exercise police power, but prohibits the excessive and vengeful use of this power.

### b. Moral Meaning of Suffering

The two precepts also attribute moral meaning to suffering. First, forgiveness and *satyagraha* presuppose positions of strength. They both occur instead of vengeance or violence. The offended has a superior moral position, with a right to retribution, restitution or even vengeance. When she gives up this debt, she may suffer. Suffering in the context of forgiveness and *satyagraha* must be voluntary, and when it occurs, shows courage and strength (Bondurant 1969, 28).

From Sobrino's perspective, taking seriously the call to forgive, and incarnating the love of God in the world also may well mean suffering. When we "forgive" and oppose sin, we may well suffer under the forces of destruction – danger, persecution, and death (Sobrino 1994, 61-62). Likewise, Erasmus contended, "If you can avoid evil by suffering it yourself, do so. . . The greater your position the more ready you ought to be to forgive another's crime" (Merton 1964, 15). Merton suggests that this means one can overcome evil by taking it upon oneself. The only way truly to "overcome" the enemy is to help him become other than an enemy, even if it means suffering (Ibid., 15).

Suffering is the third principle of *satyagraha*. Gandhi said, "Nonviolence is impossible without self-purification" (Ibid. 1964, 44, I-245). In fact,

... Freedom and slavery are mental states. . . [S]ay to yourself, 'I shall no longer accept the role of a slave. I shall not obey orders as such but shall disobey when they are in conflict with my conscience.' . . . This may mean suffering. Your

readiness to suffer will light the torch of freedom which can never be put out. (*Ibid.* 56, II-10)

However effective suffering might be as a tactic for raising consciousness, Gandhi never advocated suffering for its own sake. He believed that the sight of suffering on the part of the multitudes would melt the heart of the aggressor and induce cessation of violence (Helmick 2001, 308). This is an important point. The moral meaning or redemptive value does not apply to suffering that is imposed or forced; neither is it about meaning that is articulated for someone else, especially by the offender for the offended. Rather, it applies to suffering that is voluntarily undergone in the service of the principles of forgiveness and *satyagraha*.

#### VI. Conclusion

Although there are many similarities in end and content between reconciliation and *satyagraha*, there are also nuances that enrich the meanings of each. Both reconciliation and *satyagraha* work to overcome past oppression and injustice, and ultimately rebuild a just and peaceful community. Both attribute some moral responsibility to the victim, as well as the oppressor, to making this happen. Both see some form of moral meaning in voluntary suffering.

The primary difference noted in this article is in the possibility of the use of limited force. While *satyagraha* eschews violence and physical force of any kind, there is the possibility in reconciliation for the limited use of physical force to achieve just and peaceful ends. There are Christian theologians who argue that at times a minimum force might be necessary for police powers, for cessation of oppression, or for retributive justice. In addition, reconciliation can include the notion of legitimate state sanctioned police power.

Finally, in both reconciliation and *satyagraha*, means and ends are related and work together. Gandhi stated that *ahimsa* is not the goal; truth is the goal. A steadfast pursuit of *ahimsa* is inevitably bound to truth (Helmick 2001, 311). Truth, *Sat*, and nonviolence, *ahimsa* are intertwined, and held together in the God of love (*Ibid.* 312). There is intrinsic connection between means and ends. The means is the end in process and the ideal in the making (Shridharani 1939, 316, 34). “The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree; and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree. ... We reap exactly as we sow. (Gandhi, 10), Impure means result in an impure end (Merton 1964, 62, II-274). Likewise, in the ongoing process of reconciliation, forgiveness, repentance, love and justice are intertwined, and our actions must be consonant with the outcome. Reconciliation is both the means and the end. The lesson of both *satyagraha* and reconciliation is that our moral obligation is to act with the understanding that the right means often also lead to the right outcome.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g. R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publ. Inc., 2000); Glen H. Stassen, ed., *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians . 5:18-19 states:

All this [new life in Christ] is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. (NRSV)

<sup>3</sup> Sobrino incorporates notions of justice into his discussion of forgiveness; thus he discusses a process that is not simply forgiveness as I term it here, but one that approaches reconciliation.

<sup>4</sup> Volf argues that the dichotomy between oppressed and oppressor is not helpful for reconciliation, as in many instances the liberated become the oppressed.

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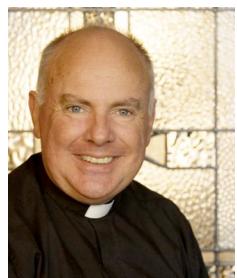
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