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Editorial

This issue of Current Dialogue reflects our diverse network through the many contributions. It spans a good part of the world; it communicates stories on different topics and in different contexts. It straddles the meaning of living as a Christian minority in Indonesia or as a Jew in Iran. It deals with the question of Gospel and Culture in Africa or the vitality of African religion in the midst of imported faiths such as Christianity or Islam. It mirrors the interaction of Christian faith with philosophia perennis and post-modernism. There is a contribution by your editor from a conference in Tehran on the topic *"Islam – a Victim of Terrorism"*. It portrays Gandhi and the quest for Satyagraha and active non-violence.

There is a short report from a meeting organised by the Office on Interreligious Relations and Dialogue (IRRD) and the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ). Here Jews were invited to comment on a document by Christians about the significance of the nature and mission of the church. It might seem as if there would not be very much for Jews to comment on given the intrinsically Christian topic. However, the report will give you some idea of how much Jewish questions and comments prompted a discussion among Christian theologians and also challenged the Jewish participants. It is true that dialogue certainly provides insights and knowledge about the other but often it prompts the one participating in dialogue to ask questions about him/herself. In this issue there is also a report from the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies.

Two contributions are particularly important. One highlights the effort by some Christians in India to address the controversial issue of proselytism and conversion, in no uncertain terms. The topic is high on the agenda of the program, now renamed **Inter-religious Dialogue and Cooperation** in the new structure. Since 2006 we have been involved in a project to run for several years with the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) on the topic of conversion as a problematic issue in interreligious relations. Our goal is to produce a code of conduct on conversion, which we hope we could discuss and share with the constituency of the World Council of Churches, the Roman-Catholic Church, Evangelical Christians as well as Pentecostal Christians.

In mid-August, there will be an intra-Christian gathering of Christians from these constituencies in Toulouse, France. They will deliberate on how a code of conduct could be conceptualised, what it should contain, and how we could further the making of such a code of conduct. It is also important to determine how it could be communicated and owned by Christians throughout the world as a sign of respect for the integrity of people of other faiths and as a sign of commitment to our calling as disciples of Christ. In all this, we need to rethink some of our most cherished notions. Robert Traer shares some reflections on the question of Truth.

The Inter-religious Dialogue and Cooperation program has not only acquired its new name. It also stresses a particular emphasis: co-operation. We welcome two new staff members to this program. Ms. Rima Barsoum has been appointed Program Executive with a particular responsibility for Christian-Muslim relations. She introduces herself in this issue of Current Dialogue. Ms. Marietta Ruhland will strengthen the administration of the office. A director is to be appointed by the Executive Committee in September to lead the program.

Hoping you enjoy reading this issue,

Hans Ucko

New Program Executive for Christian-Muslim Relations

Inter-Religious Dialogue and Cooperation program



Rima Barsoum joined the World Council of Churches as Program Executive for Christian-Muslim Relations in the program on Inter-Religious Dialogue and Cooperation on 1 July, 2007. She has been committed to the ecumenical movement and worked with youth groups in Syria and the Middle East since 1986.

She graduated from the University of Birmingham, UK with MPhil degree in Inter-Religious Relations. Before that, she was a student of the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey and previously had obtained a BSc. in Construction Management from the faculty of Civil Engineering - University of Aleppo, Syria. She worked as a Supervisor-engineer for four years.

Specialized in Christian-Muslim relations, Rima researched in the history and contemporary issues in inter-religious dialogue. Her research project focused on religion and politics in the Middle East, the role of religion in public life and the need for inter-religious collaboration between faith-groups, faith-based organizations and international organizations for development and sustainability in the region.

Between 2000-2004, Rima worked with the Middle East Council of Churches, MECC, as a National coordinator for the Youth Program and for the URM projects in Syria. She also worked with Iraqi refugees in Syria during and after the war on Iraq, and contributed to the peace making program for the Presbyterian Church - USA, as an International peace-maker in spring 2004. During this time, she planned and organized several national and regional seminars on issues related to young people in the Middle East and of common concerns in church and society, such as Ecumenical Formation, Youth and Globalization, Christian Presence and Witness in the Middle East, Christian-Muslim Dialogue, and Building the Culture of Peace and Acceptance.

Rima thinks inter-religious dialogue is not merely a contentious theological encounter but also a continuous witness of religious people working together in the modern world, carrying global responsibility for the common good. This implies that religious pluralism and co-human well-being must go together in a continuous awareness of “the religious Other and the suffering Other.”

Nature and Mission of the Church

Rabbi Dr Andrew Goldstein
Ruth Weyl

Realising the need for a closer working relationship between the World Council of Churches (WCC) and The International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ) the two organisations jointly arranged a meeting in London in December 2005 of Christian scholars with a few Jewish consultants

This led to a much more directive consultation of theologians and scholars in December 2006 at the Boldern Evangelical Study Centre on the shores of Lake Zurich. Thirteen Christians and four Jews spent two days under the facilitation of Dr Peter Pettit of Allentown USA with the agenda of together commenting on the WCC Faith and Order Paper 198 "The Nature and Mission of the Church".

The WCC is hoping to publish this paper by 2011 in order to define a common Christian belief as a tool in seeking unity amongst Christians: a worthy aim indeed. Yet the document seeking to promote Christian unity was found to be riddled with phrases and ideas that were to differing degrees problematic to Jews and Muslims (and Eastern faiths too). Fortunately, before we Jews were asked to speak, a number of Catholic theologians had already distributed comments listing their criticisms of the paper. Just a few examples: using Old Testament to describe the Jewish scriptures, a minor problem. Of greater import, the paper expresses the supercessionist view that Christianity took over from Judaism the title and role of "God's Chosen People". Such a view was long ago abandoned by most Catholic authorities and most liberal Protestant theologians and yet it seemed to be present in Paper 198.

We Jews bridled at the very word "Mission" used often in the paper. Christian missionaries sadly have a bad reputation in Jewish circles - especially when they try to convert Jews to their faith. And yet our discussion led us to ask: if one really believes in something and thinks it would help others, what is wrong in trying to promote one's beliefs, so long, of course, as it entails no coercion or underhand methods? We recalled that the founders of the Liberal Jewish Movement in Britain and the founders of Reform Judaism in Germany decades before had thought that Liberal/Reform Judaism was the ultimate, sensible, rational religion: pure ethical monotheism. They urged their followers to try to spread the word. Maybe the Shoah put paid to that idea, although it was this event that led to the founding of the Council of Christians and Jews and in time to the ICCJ. And this seminar in Zurich was evidence of the work done since the Shoah to remove misunderstanding and distrust between Christians and Jews and to fight anti-Semitism. Yet there are no references to the Shoah in the Paper and there was scant reference to Judaism at all, nor of the Church's origin in a Jewish background and in the relationship between the two religions over the centuries.

Such was the open and trusting nature of the encounter that all such criticisms were openly stated and careful notes made by Bishop John Hind, the Chair of the Faith and Order Commission, and by others involved in the publication of the papers. And Jews too realised that they had a task to do also and should consider working towards a Jewish equivalent of the Faith and Order Commission to take on the task first approached by the authors of "*Dabru Emet*"*.

Jews make demands that Christians "clean up their act" but are Jews prepared to reciprocate? We demand that Christians remove from their lectionary and liturgy prayers that we find offensive, but are we prepared to do the same? There are many passages in the

Torah that are disturbing, especially in our dealings with other nations and people. Of course we Liberal Jews can omit them, but in Orthodox synagogues they are diligently read out as the word of God, thankfully only in Hebrew. A talk on the history of the *Aleynu* prayer pointed out that some recently published prayerbooks (eg Art Scroll) had re-introduced passages in this prayer offensive to Christians. And so we discussed and exchanged views - it was positive religious dialogue at its best.

Two memorable experiences: A member of the Church of South India made it clear that people in his church in southern India knew Jews only through the New/Old Testament; no concept of the Judaism that developed for about 2000 years after Jesus. And he said "Your missionaries came and offered us an Asian Jesus but ended up giving us a white God". Christianity is vibrant in the southern hemisphere, yet still we wish them to see faith through European eyes. This is a challenge to European Christianity, and yet also for Jews if we want them to see beyond an anti-Jewish message that can be found in the New Testament, or to see modern Judaism as being the same as that depicted in the Hebrew Bible

As we got to the end of discussing the Paper, John Mbiti, a black Methodist minister from Kenya made us really think. He spoke of his, and Africans in general, affinity with the story of Israel in the Bible; the slavery, Exodus, trials in the wilderness. And he gently questioned Western Christianity's emphasis on the crucifixion and resurrection, on life after death, on Jesus bleeding on the cross. In Africa they do not emphasise the dying Jesus, but the living Jesus, the gentle man of peace, an exemplary life, healing the sick, helping the poor and dispossessed, bringing happiness to the distressed. This was the message and the hope Jesus could bring to millions impoverished in Africa. The realisation that the ultimate object of true religion is not to engage in theological debates or ponder the meaning of myths, or to force our beliefs on others, but to do God's work by bringing healing and happiness to this world, to work to end poverty and the growing gap between rich and poor - the oppression, slavery, crippling wars that blight our world today. This is the urgent task of Judaism as well as Christianity and Islam.

By the concluding session a long list of recommendations and hopes for future discussion was made; some commenting directly on the Faith and Order Paper, but many laying out an agenda for further Jewish/Christian (and Muslim) encounter. For instance, there is a serious need to honestly and deeply discuss the theology and practical implications today of the land and the State of Israel; its meaning to Jews, Christians and Muslims. We need to investigate the accusation of a perceived revival of anti-Semitism in certain Church pronouncements. Yet Jews also need to re-assess the life and ministry of Jesus and both Christians and Jews need to explore ways in which they can work together on common issues like poverty and ecology. Let us hope the thoughts noted down at the meeting will inspire the WCC and ICCJ to find time for further discussion both separately and together.

*The Dabru Emet ("Speak [the] Truth") is a document concerning the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. It was signed by over 120 rabbis from all branches of Judaism. http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?item=1014

Rabbi Dr Andrew Goldstein is Senior Rabbi of Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue, Chair of European Region of the World Union Progressive Judaism (WUPJ), Member of the ICCJ Executive Board, and co-chair of the ICCJ Theology Committee.

Ruth Weyl is Consultant to the ICCJ and for the last thirty years she has been part of the development of ICCJ as one expression of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue.

Speaking the Truth

Robert Traer

How are we to speak truthfully about religions? In interfaith dialogue the accepted answer to this question is that no one can speak *for* a religion, but that people can speak *out of* their own religion about their faith. Each person's statement is true insofar as it expresses his or her personal faith and does not misrepresent any facts about the religious tradition.

A professor teaching a class on the world's religions accepts a different discipline. In the study of religions speaking truthfully involves stating only facts about a religion and avoiding any personal expression of faith. Unlike the interfaith context, which emphasizes what members of a religious tradition believe to be true, the study of religions seeks to describe what observers of a religious tradition can verify to be true.

For instance, in an interfaith forum an evangelical Protestant may say that becoming a Christian requires being "born again," and this claim will be understood to mean that this is not only his belief but also a belief held by many Christians. In the context of teaching about Christianity, however, this statement will be contrasted with the faith of Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and other Protestants who do not share this belief. Drawing this contrast distinguishes one meaning of truth from another. For the evangelical Protestant, being born again is a *theological truth* (a belief) that is necessary for Christian faith. In the study of religions, the *historical truth* (a fact) is that a majority of Christians have not believed the experience of being born again is necessary for salvation.

From the point of view of the evangelical Protestant, theological truth is clearly more important than historical truth. Yet, knowing that not all Christians share this belief might lead us to wonder whether this belief sums up Christian teaching more accurately (truthfully) than an historical summary that includes this belief along with other beliefs affirmed by many Christians.

History

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a Christian and noted historian of religions, once suggested that: "There is more truth in history than in doctrine." Should we consider religious traditions in a more historical way, rather than affirming (or comparing) their doctrines? Would this approach allow us to speak more truthfully about religions?

Consider, for instance, what this might mean for talking about the support in Christianity and Islam for violence. Al-Afif al-Akhdar, an Arab scholar, suggested in 2006 that two different forms of Islam may be derived from the period of Muhammad. The first arose in Mecca and "is essentially peace-seeking. The use of violence, even for self-defense, was prohibited. In this Islam, jihad was prohibited. This Islam was the basis for the mystical Sufi movement."

The second form of Islam, which Akhdar characterizes as "jihadist," developed when Muhammad was forced to move from Mecca to Medina; "it is this Islam that the contemporary terrorists have adopted. To justify the passage from the 'conciliatory' peace of Mecca to the militant peace of Medina, Muhammad told the Muslims that jihad is permissible only for self-defense [The Pilgrimage, Surah 22:39]: 'To those against whom war is made, permission is given [to fight], because they are wronged.' Muhammad was wronged – he was expelled from Mecca, and the purpose of the defensive

jihad is to enable his return." (Ehud Ein-Gil, "The Roots of Jihad," *Haaretz*, 18 March 2006)

Whether or not this is an accurate depiction of Islam, it is factually true that Christianity began as a peaceful religious practice and only affirmed the right of self-defense after the Roman Emperor Constantine was converted and began to use the church to promote support for imperial rule. This rationalization for violence was soon used by church leaders to suppress heretics and in the following centuries was employed to justify killing Jews and crusading against Muslims.

Which Islam, or which Christianity, is the true faith? Both Muslims and Christians are divided as to the theological truth of their traditions, but the historical truth clearly is that both Islam and Christianity include diverse theological claims about violence. History reveals that Muslims and Christians have been warmongers as well as peacemakers.

The contemporary Christian attempt to characterize the Christian tradition as more peaceful than the Islamic tradition is largely self-serving. As Christians, we know too little of Islamic history and have forgotten too much of Christian history, to make any such comparison. Moreover, most Christians in the United States do not realize that the war against terrorism, which is presently being waged by the Bush administration on behalf of US interests, is perceived by many in the world, and especially by Muslims, as a Christian crusade.

Only a minority of Christians and a minority of Muslims believe that the nonviolent imperative initially embraced, it seems, by the founder of each community of faith is the true Christianity or the true Islam. Christian and Muslim communities have generally justified the use of violence in self-defense, and often each community has promoted war as a means of extending its influence.

What, then, are we to conclude about Christianity and Islam? That each religious tradition was once nonviolent, but through the centuries has come to justify and use violence? Period. Or, is the truth that both religious traditions have supported nonviolence in some historical contexts and violence in others, and thus that each religious tradition may be more or less violent?

Faith

Al-Afif al-Akhdar embraces the second understanding, and he is committed to an Islam that strengthens its emphasis on nonviolence. To pursue this imperative in the Muslim world Akhdar recommends "a reform of the Islamic discourse, of religious education, the religious media, the sermons in the mosques, and so forth. The plan is to remove from the textbooks all the violent and jihadist verses and leave them only in the source, in the holy writings."

To Christian ears this sounds very unlikely. Yet, he notes that Tunisia has done this since 1999, and in October 2005: "Libya, too, canceled the [public] teaching of jihadist Islam and of the verses that justify violence."

What might a similar approach to the Bible mean for Christians? That we should stop reading, as the word of God, texts in the Old Testament in which God orders the Israelites to exterminate their enemies. (See Deuteronomy 20:17, for example.) A peacemaking approach must also mean not reading on Good Friday the passage from the passion story that has the crowd of Jews say, in reference to the coming crucifixion of Jesus: "His blood be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25) Christians have long used this verse to rationalize violence against Jews.

In addition, Christians should not teach that the battle depicted in the Book of Revelation at the end of time is a prophecy. The interpretation that the end of Revelation is about an actual war to be fought between Christians and all other peoples, is a reading that the church has resisted for much of its history, as this exegesis of the text is contrary to the bulk of the testimony concerning Jesus and his followers in the rest of the New Testament.

Christians and Muslims should also urge their leaders not to identify with Satan those who oppose their understanding of the Bible or the Koran. Both scriptures identify Satan with the force of evil in the world, but leave the notion of Satan shrouded in mystery. Yet, recently some Christians have labeled Osama Bin Laden as Satan, and some Muslims have identified President Bush with Satan. We should reject all such invidious characterizations.

Instead, we should propose that faith in the power of good is at the heart of each of these traditions, for those with ears to hear. To encourage this faith Muslims have, since the 9th century, taught that Jesus said: "Charity does not mean doing good to him who does good to you, for this is to return good for good. Charity means that you should do good to him who does you harm." (Tarif Khalidi, editor and translator, *The Muslim Jesus: Savings and Stories in Islamic Literature*, Harvard 2001)

As Christians, we may act in solidarity with this Muslim teaching by taking to heart the words of Paul in the New Testament of the Christian Bible: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:21)

Dr Robert Traer teaches ethics at Dominican University in San Rafael, California and led the International Association for Religious Freedom from 1990-2000. His books include *Quest for Truth: Critical Reflections on Interfaith Cooperation* (2000), *Jerusalem Journal: Finding Hope* (2006), and *Doing Ethics in a Diverse World* (2007).



Kenneth Cracknell

IN GOOD AND GENEROUS FAITH

Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism

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The Jewish Society in Iran

Arash Abaie

It is said that Jews have been in Iran for more than 2,600 years, arriving there even before the destruction of the First Temple in 587 BCE and the resultant exile of the Jews from Judea to Babylon (modern day Iraq).

As a result of the defeat of the Babylonian empire in 537 BCE by Cyrus, the founder of the first Persian Dynasty, the captivity of the Jews in Babylon was ended.

Many Jews returned to Jerusalem (perhaps afraid, as the Psalmist said, that their tongues might cleave to the roofs of their mouths and their right arms wither for forgetting Jerusalem), but others chose to relocate from Babylon to the land of their liberator, increasing the small community already based in the area of Iran known as Shushan.

Cyrus was followed on the throne by his son, Darius, who in turn was succeeded by Xerxes I. King Ahashuerus of the Book of Esther is believed to be the same man as Xerxes I, son of Darius and grandson of Cyrus. Xerxes I was born in 519 BCE and was assassinated in Persepolis in 465 BCE.

According to traditional Jewish sources, the story of Purim took place in the mid-300s BCE, during the rule of the Persian-Median Empire and the Babylonian exile, after the destruction of the First Temple and before the building of the Second Temple.

King Ahasuerus succeeded Cyrus, the Persian king who allowed the Jews to begin rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem that Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed. Ahasuerus and Esther are said to be the parents of Darius, another king who permitted Jews in Persia to return to Jerusalem, something Ahasuerus had prohibited.

But many Jews in the Babylonian exile chose to stay where they had already set down roots and built a community infrastructure that centuries later would produce the Babylonian Talmud. Today's Persian and Iraqi Jews trace their lineage back to those communities.

At the present, the population of the Jews in Iran is estimated about 20'000 of which about 10'000 people are in Tehran. The rest of the Iranian Jews are residing in Shiraz, Isfahan, Kermanshah, Yazd, Kerman, Rafsanjan, Borujerd, Sanandaj and Oromieh respectively.

The administration of the Jewish Social Religious affairs in the past has been under two authorities, "Hebra" (the assembly of the elite of community) and "Bet-Din" (the house of religion). Since 1938, Hebra was formally registered under the title of "The Tehran Jewish Committee (Association)" and is now operating under supervision of the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and Endowments Organization. This association has committees (subgroups) like Cultural, States, Youth, (Domestic) Dispute Settling, and Cooperative committees (for poor families).

By establishment of the National legislature in the Constitutional period (about a century ago), religious minorities in Iran obtained representation in the parliament and since then Jews have always had representatives in the parliament. Also after the victory of the Islamic revolution (1979), there is a Jewish representative in the parliament. After the victory of the Islamic Revolution, a Jewish representative has had an active presence in the Constitution of the Elite Council. According to the Constitution, Jews have a representative in the Islamic Consultative Assembly (the Parliament called "Majlis"). Political, social, and

religious activities of the Jewish society revolve around Jewish religious authorities. Any position, declaration or pursuance of legal, political, and social issues of the Jewish society is addressed through bodies such as the Jewish representative in the Islamic Consultative Assembly and the Tehran Jewish Committee Board of Directors.

At the present, this community has many synagogues, special schools, cultural complexes, youth, students and women centers, centers for the elderly, central libraries, computer training centers, music training centers, meeting halls and kosher butchers according to the Jewish religion in different regions and cities of the country. Information and publishing of Jewish cultural works through books and journals has almost always been possible also after the Islamic Revolution. In addition there are also periodical local bulletins, such as the magazine of “Tamouz” (up to 1989) and the monthly of “Ofegh-BINA” (organ of Jewish Committee since 1999). Tehran Jews usually do their sport activities in the sport club of “Gibor.” This club is responsible for sport training courses and competitions as well as contests between religious minorities and always has cooperation of Jewish and non-Jewish coaches. The Jewish Women Organization is cooperating with this club in women’s sport affairs, too. The Charity Hub is one of the charity agencies of the Jewish society with its main activity through the Dr. Sapir Hospital in the south of Tehran city, providing services to all Tehran’s citizens. The cost of maintaining this hospital is primarily provided by Jewish charity.

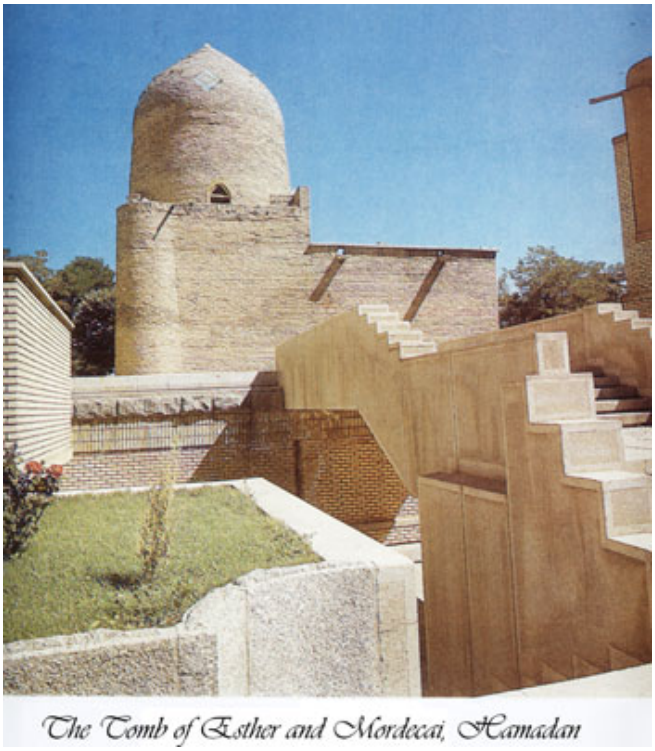
Religious teaching for Jews is taught formally up to the end of high school according to books approved by the Education Ministry at certain hours (instead of Islamic teachings and the Quran) in public schools. Along with this, sessions for training of religious teachings and the explanation of Torah and sometimes teachings of Talmud are given in the synagogues (Talmud Torah). In addition, groups of youth usually organize religious gatherings and congregations and religious speeches in most of the synagogues of Tehran and other cities throughout the country.

Tehran Jews have established and made use of many schools. In recent years a number of these schools are now being used by the Education Office for Muslim students because of the reduction in population as well as the dispersion of Jewish students in other public schools. Now, there are four special schools active in Tehran teaching Jews.

There are many holy and historical places of Jews in Iran, such as the tomb of Prophet Daniel in the city of Shoush, the tomb of Ester and Mordechai in Hamedan and of the Prophet Habakkuk in Touiserkan.

There are also tombs of several outstanding Jewish scholars in Iran like "Harav Uresharga" in Yazd and "Hakham Mullah Moshe Halevi" in Kashan. Muslims also respect these sages.

Tomb of Esther and Mordechai in Hamadan



The Tomb of Esther and Mordecai, Hamadan

The tomb of Esther and Mordechai is in the city of Hamadan, the site of Megillat Esther’s

Shushan, about halfway between Teheran and Iran's western border with Iraq, Hamadan is in the west of Iran. The city used to have a large population of Jews, so that the Bazaar was known as “the Jewish market”.

The main reason for the Jewish presence in Hamadan is the tomb of Esther and Mordecai, which historically has been a gathering point for many Jewish people.

In the past the city had five Synagogues, but some of them are now being used by Moslems. Some famous doctors and artists of the Iranian Jewish community are from this city.

Nowadays there are a few Jewish families living in Hamadan. However, many Iranian Jews from other cities of Iran come during the year to visit the tombs, specially on Purim to read the Megila, the scroll of Esther.

Going to visit the tomb, one had to bow low to go inside its entrance, assuring that a pilgrim entered with an attitude of respect. Pilgrims would pray while walking around two large, ornately carved trunks, before they would back out of the tomb. By backing out, the pilgrims avoided showing disrespect to the great personages buried inside.

The burial sites of Mordechai and Esther are said to be in the cellar below, in the exact locations where the two trunks are placed on the floor above.

Architect Yassi Gabbay, who renovated the tomb about 25 years ago, said pilgrims used to light candles in an antechamber before entering the main room of the tomb, but said that custom was stopped as a result of a fire. Candles were particularly dangerous in the main room, he added, because of the pilgrims' custom of draping the ornately carved trunks with cloths as a remembrance of their visit.

The tomb itself dates back only to the 16th or 17th century, built over a deep pit in which the original burials are believed to have taken place.

Although the small Jewish community of Hamadan has mostly emigrated since the Islamic revolution, the tomb remains well cared for by the Islamic Revolutionary authorities.

There is a question about how it happened that Esther's and Mordechai's tomb is in Hamadan, rather than in Persepolis, which was the ancient capital of Persia (Iran).The answer is that after King Ahashuerus died, there was a king who did not know Esther.

Hamadan, which has far cooler temperatures than the desert city of Persepolis, was the summer capital of Persia. A story has it that Esther and Mordechai removed themselves from the palace to the summer resort, where they spent their final years.

In the shrine-and-pilgrimage-focused Middle East, Jews would often make the trek to pray at the tombs of Esther and Mordechai.

The tombs of Esther and Mordechai were the Jewish place to go and ask and pray and cry, especially when it was difficult to go to Israel and the *Kotel HaMaaravi*, the Western Wall.

Most Jewish ceremonies in Iran would be performed in the privacy of the home, or in the synagogue, to avoid attracting attention. But it is not unusual that people take photos and reporters make films of Jewish worship which occasionally are being shown on Iranian television.

Mr Arash Abaie is a religious teacher of Judaism in Tehran Jewish high schools and is a lecturer in Tehran Synagogues. He is the author of three books on Judaism for high school, editor in chief of a Jewish magazine and editor of books on Judaism. He has calculated the exact daily Jewish prayer hours in a solar year for the Tehran horizon. He is member of a scientific board of AID (Institute for Inter-religious Dialogue).

Living in the Plural Context of Today

Limantina Sihaloho

I was born in a Batak family 31 years ago in Urung Panei, Simalungun regency in North Sumatra. My father is from the Batak Toba clan and my mother from the Batak Simalungun clan. Both of them are Christians, Lutherans, although people in my village do not really know what Lutheran is. The majority of them know that they are Christians. They are Protestants and not Catholic. Since my parents are Christians, I was immediately baptised in my village church, "Gereja Kristen Protestan Simalungun", when I was less than one year old.

During my childhood, none of my friends was Muslim. All were Christians, both Protestant (Lutheran) and Catholic. When I was in the first year of my high school I made friends with Muslim students, a Javanese girl and a Batak boy. During the class of Religion, Christians and Muslims were separated into different classes. None of us ever questioned why we had to be separated during the Religion class. I knew nothing about Islam except that they fasted during Ramadan. There was a mosque near my high school but I never went to that mosque and never thought of doing so. During my University years I moved into a house, where 12 female students, 10 Muslims and 2 Christians lived. It was a nice small community. We never discussed religion. I never wanted to do so and I think, they felt the same. During the *Idul Fitri* season, I wished them "Happy Idul Fitri!" During Christmas, I remember, some of them wished me "Merry Christmas". Regularly, on a special day all of us would go to our landlord to say, "Happy Idul Fitri". As a Christian, it was a special thing for me to find that those Muslim friends, who were my neighbours, always invited and included me. Looking back to the five years of my study I wished my lecturers who taught us Islam would have made us go and visit and talk with Muslims instead of just spending all of the semesters sitting inside the class.

The encounter of students from different organizations/movements (mainly Protestant, Catholic and Muslim) was quite intensive in the years before Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) was elected the fourth president of Indonesia. Students from any religious background came along together to fight against injustices. Students had the same concern and struggle, fighting the authoritarian and totalitarian regime of Soeharto, who had been in power for more than 30 years by 1998, building his extended-family empire around the country, monopolizing the economy, colonizing and controlling the mind of the civilians, killing any potential protester.

Students were able to set up a non-profit organization, *Lintas Sara* in 1999 to counter the interreligious conflicts and to promote the idea of dialogue especially among the young people.

Students set up a base-camp in front of Abdurrahman Wahid's house at South Jakarta on December 1998. Abdurrahman Wahid had his *Open House* and we managed to participate. We asked his permission for we wanted to have our tent in front of his house. Gus Dur agreed. While having our base-camp in front of Abdurrahman Wahid's house, we were also visiting many national leaders for audiences, sharing experiences and hopes for the near future of Indonesia amid the crisis and critical situation of the country. Many groups of students around the country were doing similar things.

During my study at Universitas Sanata Dharma I was also a member of a community named *Komunitas Tikar Pandan*, a community of

young adults from different religious backgrounds in Yogyakarta. The majority of the members were those who were bored with the rigidity of her/his religious group. No wonder. We were and are the generation born during Soeharto's totalitarian regime. For years, the Christian establishment or its Muslim equivalent or any other for that matter had to somehow cooperate with the regime. Not many people dared to say that Soeharto's regime was a totalitarian regime during his time in power. It is only now that people can breathe and express what they feel they need to express.

We were young people protesting against the rigidity of our religious communities and *Tikar Pandan* became a community without too many regulations. There was a breath of fresh air. We had our regular meeting every Saturday night at Jl. Kuwera 14 in Yogyakarta. We shared our experiences and discovered together how religions are related to everything in life: economy, politics, gender, culture, language, identity, history, environment, etc. At the same time, we were enriching each other by sharing our personal stories, experiences and perspectives. Many in our group were talented musicians and their repertoire was Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian songs. We sang songs from Taizé promoting love, peace, inclusivism and tolerance.

More and more people got to know *Tikar Pandan* community. We were often invited to attend various meetings to share what we had been doing as the *Tikar Pandan* community. We formed a choir, which was often invited to sing at various events at the local, national and international level in Yogyakarta.

As a Christian who was born and grew up in a homogeneous Batak-Christian community in Batak Land, I did not have any negative direct encounter with Muslims. My meetings as a student with Muslims taught me more about Muslims. World events have made us understand that Muslims and Christians all through history have lived through many ups and downs. History has left us with a difficult and wounded relationship. The very relationship of today between Muslims and Christians is intrinsically related to the past and the scars in our hearts from generation to generation are quite deep and painful.

Neither Christians nor Muslims have enough knowledge about the other; Christians in general do not know what Islam really is and Muslims in general do not know what Christianity really is. We are all fed with the wrong food for our minds regarding other religions. Whether Muslims or Christians, we have somehow consumed the wrong food for our mind.

What can we do? I honestly can say and many of us do know that Muslim-Christian relations today are difficult to deal with. It would be fatal if we do not do our best to involve ourselves. The West needs to acknowledge the fall out of the era of colonialism in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Christianity brought by Europeans during the centuries of colonialism has been seen as a colonial religion, particularly in a country where Christians are in minority, such as in Indonesia. In Indonesia Christianity has been seen as a colonial component. Whom should we blame? Have Indonesian Christians not tried their best to communicate themselves to their Muslim neighbours? After all Christians were also participating in the fight against the colonial regime. Protestantism was the religion of the colonialists and our Muslim neighbours felt that Indonesian Christians were connected directly with the colonialists, sharing the same religion. Churches in Indonesia were supported financially by churches in the West in building schools, hospitals, etc. Even today, our Muslim neighbours continue unfortunately to wear the same lenses when looking at us Indonesian Christians, a group of people supported by the West. At the same time, Indonesian Christians have been programming far too few encounters with their neighbours, in particular the Muslims. We need to seek ways to heal the scars. We have to acknowledge that there is hatred. And that it has been there for a long time.

In some homogenous ethnic communities in Indonesia, we have been lucky that we are linked together by our culture (*adat*), long before the arrival of colonialism. Local culture still plays an important role in binding people together irrespective of their religious background. This is what I found among the Batak people. Batak culture (*adat-Batak*) is still something that keeps us together. Batak Christians know very well that they have to prepare special *halal* food for Batak Muslims. Since Batak Christians generally can eat all kinds of meat, they do not have a problem being guests of their Batak Muslim relatives. Europeans brought Christianity to Indonesia during the colonial time. Today Christians really need to do their own theology in the context of Indonesia and not in the context of a long gone Europe, as if we were still living two or three centuries ago. It is easy to say, but it is difficult to practice. In the blood of our theological heart some specific and dogmatic values have been socialized, from generation to generation, which makes most of our Christian thinking and acting a stranger amidst the plural context of today.

We really have to be more culturally and religiously sensitive in today's plural world. One of the many things I get to learn from what has been happening in Aceh after the tsunami has to do with the sensitivity of Western people. You cannot act in Aceh, where the majority of its population is Muslim as if you were still in Europe or America. As one Batak saying goes, *sidapot solup do naro*: those who come into any (foreign) place have to adjust themselves into the local culture/adat. Newcomers have to learn and listen in order to be able to understand.

As visiting-scholar in Chicago I experienced how Christians and Muslims lived in a good relationship. In Littlefield Presbyterian Church, Muslims feel comfortable to join some specific services set up in a way that both Muslims and Christians feel included in the service. Muslims respect Jesus as one of God's prophets. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is respected by Muslims. These are meeting-points for Christians and Muslims. The imam and pastor are key people in this encountering process. When I was there I asked myself, "Is it possible to have something like this in Indonesian churches? To have Muslims and Christians, pastor and imam at a Sunday service together?" I would love this kind of encounter. I am sure God is not going to get mad if we dare to put this into practice. I think God is happy and smiles. When I sing a Muslim religious song in *Tikar Pandan* community for example, or when I enter a mosque and participate in their Friday saalat (prayer), I do not think God is angry with me.

Every religion is connected directly with God. This understanding doesn't diminish my Christianity and my faith to God through Jesus Christ. What I would like to see is that everyone practices her/his religion with love, justice, balance and peace.

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Can the African Christian Problem Ever Be Resolved?

Rev. Dr Prince Conteh

Introduction

The tension between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity has been described as the "African Christian problem".[1] In many parts of Africa, African Christians[2] cling tenaciously to their traditional religious beliefs and customs and are reluctant to give them up in favour of Christianity. This results in conflicts between ATR and Christianity because the Church dismisses traditional practices as heathenism, and often has refuses to encourage any form of dialogue with African traditionalists.

This work reflects the progress made towards a resolution by means of organized dialogue between Limba Christians/Traditionalists and Christian Limbas[3] in the National Pentecostal Limba Church (NPLC)[4] in Sierra Leone, West Africa. I will begin with an overview of various theological and ecclesiological attempts to address the African Christian problem. This will be followed by a summary of the reasons for the persistence of ATR in Christianity and the reactions of the church to traditional religiosity. I will then explain the strategy I have employed in organizing dialogue and summarize my findings and recommendations, which have fostered mutual respect, understanding, and continued dialogue between the two groups. The paper concludes with a discussion concerning the future of the African Christian problem in general, and suggestions on how it might eventually be resolved.

Resolution Attempts Past and Present

For many decades, scholars[5], the church and ecumenical organizations have been attempting to find answers to the African Christian problem. John S. Mbiti argued that Africa has enough tools and expertise to evolve a viable form of Christianity for African Christians.[6] However, this task is complicated by the lack of a clear consensus among African theologians/religionists/missiologists and the church as to appropriate methods/approaches of dealing with the African Christian problem. Unfortunately, Mbiti's theological constructs for African theology were "context dominant" and tend towards "syncretistic amalgamation" such that the end result is "neither African nor Christian."[7] On the other side of the methodological spectrum, Kato "approached culture with the absolute standard of priori truth" maintaining a theocentric emphasis so that "Scripture critiques culture and never the reverse."[8]

Robert G. Rogers categorized African Christian theologians into two main groups based on the differences in their hermeneutical perspectives.[9] The first group, which Rogers calls the "Old Guard," is "somewhat at variance on the degree to which dialogue between Christianity and traditional religion is useful." The second group, which he calls the "New Guard," does "not have such dialogue as a major theme on their theological agenda."[10]

Some scholars have been working to provide contextual Christologies that are relevant to ATR worldviews.[11] The work of Jesus has been compared and contrasted with African traditional healers.[12] Jesus has been referred to as: "Ancestor/Proto-Ancestor"[13], "our 'brother-ancestor' in fullness"[14], "the great ancestor, our ancestor par excellence" and "an intermediary spirit between God and people"[15], "Priest"[16], and "Chief"[17]. Part One of the edited work of Robert J. Schreiter, surveys African Christologies, and Part Two discusses the different perceptions of Jesus in Africa.[18] Other scholars have published valuable

guidelines for dialogue between ATR and Christianity.[19]

In ecumenical spheres, the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) officially recognized the African Christian problem and sponsored the first conference of African theologians in Ibadan, January 1966 on the theme, "Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs." Since this event almost every African theologian has had something to say on the encounter between the two religions. The AACC continues to promote dialogue between Christians and members of other faith communities. This dialogue is however promoted to a greater degree with Islam than with ATR.

After Vatican II and the apostolic message *Africae terrarum*, a series of consultations and publications on ATR were carried out by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID). The Roman Catholic Church's "theological evaluation of other religions has gone all the way from the disregard and rejection which characterized much of Christian tradition, through a guarded acceptance and openness, to a positive assessment and recognition of salutary values."[20]

Since the development of "Guidelines on Dialogue with people of Living Faiths and Ideologies" in 1979, the World Council of Churches (WCC) has taken "significant steps towards facilitating inter-religious relations and dialogue."[21] The Critical Moment conference in June, 2005 brought together 130 participants of different faiths including indigenous religions, and "the WCC manifested its commitment to be involved in the present and future of Interreligious relations and dialogue …."[22]

The joint project for Africa – the Inter-Religious Relations and Dialogue (IRRD) of the WCC and the PCID of the Vatican – provides opportunities for the discussion of various aspects of African religiosity and culture. The project held a Francophone meeting in Dakar, Senegal 2002 and another for Anglophones in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia 2004.

Many African Independent Churches (AIC) represent a creative indigenization of the gospel in African soil. The impressive following they have attracted suggests that they are meeting the needs of many Africans and many of their church buildings are being expanded to accommodate more worshipers.

The different schools of thought and approach in dealing with the African Christian problem are reflective of the three basic typologies of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Without a doubt, the ongoing discussions about the relationship between African Christianity and the gospel suggest "that there is still work to do in the area of relating the Christian message to African cultures."[23]

Causes of the Conflict

In 2002, I undertook fieldwork to investigate the causes of the conflict between African Traditional Religion and Christianity among the Limba People of Sierra Leone. I sought to gain a better understanding of Limba religion, its persistence and the resulting conflicts with Christianity. The following are the major causes given by Limba traditionalists for their dual religiosity and tenacity:

Causes of African Dual Religiosity

ATR is Our Heritage from God

For the Limba, like many Africans, religion is a way of life. There is no sharp dividing line between religion and culture. They believe that their religion and culture originated from God, and cannot be parted with or replaced. ATR is the heritage into which the traditionalists were born. It is maintained by God and influenced by the ancestors. It "emerged from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present generation" and is "being practised today in various forms and intensities"[24] in African homelands and settlements. For these reasons, the complete renunciation of their

God-given heritage in favour of a foreign culture, as the church requires, seems a very difficult task, and is tantamount to losing their entire heritage, identity, and place, both spiritually and physically within their religio-cultural community. This is why African Christians "do not always adhere to religious and ritual demands that are formulated and expressed by the leaders of their churches."[25] Even long after their conversion to Christianity; the African traditional worldview persists in the lives of Christian converts.

Christianity is Imperialistic and Insensitive

A majority of Limba Christians, still view Christianity as the "white man's religion" that brought "new teachings and a new way of life" and attempted to "deliberately destroy" Limba culture.26 This concept is common throughout much of Africa and continues even now "that the age of foreign missions in Africa"27 is over.

Byang H. Kato has argued that "although missionaries from Europe and North America brought the gospel to Black Africa in modern times, they are not the first messengers of the gospel to our continent."28 As such, he argued, "to claim that Christianity is a white man's religion only because white missionaries brought the gospel two hundred years ago is not historically accurate."29

While Kato's argument is valid, it does not address the main reason for the persistence of this perception. Christian missionaries to Africa are still blamed for their cultural insensitivity to African values, which resulted in the transplantation of an ethnocentric form of Christianity. Successive missionaries attacked African culture, and required a complete abandonment of African culture and practices.30 Christ was "presented as the answer to the questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that a Western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom."31 Attempts were not made to answer the needs of Africans yet the missionaries enforced on Christian converts, a complete break from the African beliefs and culture that met those needs. For example, Assemblies of God (AOG) missionaries to West Africa enforced the burning of medicine and charms and prohibited members from using charms or making sacrifices. Cultural insensitivity is also displayed in the production of religious pictures, and films that are found almost everywhere in Africa portraying Jesus as a white man, from a white mother, and as the leader of white disciples.32 Insensitivity to African culture and worldview was not unique to Euro-American missionaries. Samuel Ajai Crowther an African clergyman whose parents were traditionalists and who had personally assisted the Ifa priest in his village in seeking guidance from the oracles was prominent in the attempt to eradicate traditional religion from the inhabitants of Sierra Leone and Nigeria.33

Ecclesiological Conformity

Although most missionaries handed leadership to indigenes and left Africa several decades ago, some churches still painstakingly follow the practices and teachings of the missionaries. The NPLC continues the tradition of destroying charms and its indigenous leaders still espouse the same views and philosophies of their forebears and are reluctant to study ATR in an effort to understand it or create opportunities for positive dialogue.

The NPLC, like most other mainline African churches, uses western-style vestments to portray the image of a western church and has adopted western songs, music and musical instruments. The Bible is read in English, leaving the majority of non-literate, non-English-speaking Limba Christians to feel marginalized, left out and unwelcome in the church. They criticize the church which under an indigenous leadership maintains missionary Christianity as "the same car just [with] a different driver."

The indigenous church has thus far been unable to develop a theology, which bears the distinctive stamp of African thought and

meditation. These churches read and accept Euro-American theologies without critique. Christian Africans "have not yet begun to do their own thinking and to grapple spiritually and intellectually with questions relating to the Christian faith."[34] Most churches are still enslaved to Euro-American cosmology and the struggle has become "not so much against European domination as against that of Europeanised Africans."[35]

Christianity is Novel and Inadequate

While there are many areas in which African theology shares affinity with Christian/Biblical theology, the divergences, touch on the major teachings of the two systems. For Limba Christians, the Christian teaching about the death of Christ as a sacrifice for the propitiation of sin is "strange and contradictory."36 Christian missionaries condemned human sacrifice as sinful and inhumane and then preached reconciliation to God through such a sacrifice. This problem is not, however, confined to African Christians. Even in the west, some Christians have challenged the rationale about the sacrificial death of Christ. Some western Christians, including members of the clergy, no longer believe that a loving God could have offered his son as sacrifice for the sin of humankind.

Another NPLC teaching, which does not sit well with traditionalist, is that of the mediatory role of Jesus. Traditionalists view Jesus as a stranger who knows neither them nor their culture and is therefore a far less suitable mediator than the ancestors who know them very well.

Further, the absence of protective charms and important African rituals like sacrifice makes the church less attractive and fulfilling than ATR. When African traditionalists "cannot honour their ancestors through pouring of libation, when they cannot worship God through sacred dances, when they are not able to invoke God's power of healing during worship, they must surely feel spiritually emasculated."[37] Let us now look at some of the reasons why the church continues to reject ATR.

Causes of the Church's Negative Attitude towards ATR

Exclusivism

The NPLC, like many denominations, believes that humanity's only hope of redemption is through the shed blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Luke 24:47; John 3:3; Acts 4:12; Rom. 10:13-15; Ephesians 2:8; Titus 2:11; 3:5-7). God's unique revelation in "Christ is clear – only One Way of salvation for all men, and that is through Jesus Christ."38 Therefore there is no salvation outside the church and no one can be saved without an "explicit confession of faith in Jesus Christ."39

ATR lacks the hallmarks of a true religion

African Religion is often described as 'Primitive/Tribal Religion' because it usually has no written history or scripture.40 Unlike Christianity, Islam, Hinduism or Judaism, African religion has no sacred writings or documented theology for guidance in one's spirituality. Laurenti Magesa in support of the universal recognition of ATR argued that "orality alone cannot disqualify a religious system from qualitative greatness" because Judaism, Christianity and Islam were all orally-based for long periods of time before their teachings were "codified in writing."41 It was not on account of their sacred writings that these religions attained recognition, so it is illogical to make this a requirement for the recognition of ATR. ATR theology is written on the hearts, minds, words, actions and symbols of the African people. A factor responsible for the survival of African Religion.

Syncretism and Nominalism

To guard against syncretism and nominalism among its membership, the NPLC takes "a rigid line on the question of any cultural accommodation whatsoever."42 The church thinks it is not right to bring or mix elements of traditional beliefs into Christianity on the grounds that African religion is crude, uncouth and devilish, and any such incorporation would

alter the church's spirituality. Therefore, "anything that would dilute or substantially alter the basic structures of Christianity"43 is strongly combated and the church enforces "a complete break with the past"44 as a preventive measure against syncretism and nominalism. Let us now look at the strategy I employed that brought together Limba traditionalists with Christian Limbas to start dialoguing and searching for a solution.

Strategy

Before traveling to Africa, I selected a pool of interviewees representing the five major Limba dialects and a cross-section of the Limba people. I also selected consultants including scholars, members of ecumenical organisations and Sierra Leone government employees. With the help of these consultants, I formulated a questionnaire about ATR, Christianity, and the interaction between the two religions. The goal was to understand the theology and practice of each religion from the viewpoint of the African Christians. Some of the questions included:

- How can you define Religion from a Limba Traditionalist view?
- Can you describe in detail your Religious beliefs, practices and teachings?
- How are your beliefs reflected in everyday life?
- What are the reasons that some Limba Christians still practise traditional religion?
- How are these practices affecting the church?
- What impact has Christianity on traditional religion?

In central Freetown and in five provincial towns, I organized dialectical discussions in a conference-like setting. The same questions were posed to each team and each team took turns in responding. Respondents were allowed to address each question based on knowledge, experience and personal opinion.

Findings and Recommendations

Following the interviews and discussions, I listened to the tapes and studied the notes then shared with all the participants the following findings and recommendations:

- One of the reasons for the tension between Limba traditionalists and Christian Limbas was the ignorance about the other party's worldview due to a lack of education and preconceived notions.
- Although Limba Religion and Christianity have different frameworks, it is reasonable to say they share affinities in terms of description and components.
- There are Limba religio-cultural elements and values which find parallels in the Bible[45] and which have been adopted by the Limba Church, for example the names and attributes of God. Also, the religious devotion, and numerical success of the NPLC can be attributed to the traditional heritage of the Limba in which religion is "a way of life" and a vital part of culture. Credit was given to the missionaries for their stance against the Limba traditionalists' inhumane practice of child sacrifice.
- Although the greatest divergences between Limba religion and Christianity hinge on the core teachings of each system both systems are based on faith and mystery. Because of these religious qualities, there are beliefs and practices in each system that deny human logic and understanding.

On account of these findings, I recommended that:

- The NPLC and traditionalists should seek more education about each other's values in order to foster understanding and acceptance. The NPLC on account of this education should find methods of relating the Bible to African traditional values.
- As both groups through my fieldwork are already aware of the concerns of the other, they should continue to assess their methods of approach.

- The NPLC must continue to establish a dialogue with traditionalists. Both groups must be able to sit together and work out their differences. In order for this dialogue to be effective each side must continue to listen to the other's ideas, and volunteer their own.

I continue to check the progress on a regular basis and have kept in touch with both groups, which are now meeting regularly to better understand each other. When I visited Sierra Leone in early 2005, I was delighted to see a vast improvement. Among the Limba of Sierra Leone, the resolution of the African Christian Problem now looks hopeful if things continue go the way they have been going these past three years. In a broader sense, let us now look at the future of the African Christian Problem as a whole.

The Future of the African Christian Problem

The future of the African Christian Problem is a very touchy subject. Past and present resolution attempts have demonstrated that the issue is of major concern to scholars, missionaries, the church and the African people, but there is still more work to be done. The causes of dual religiosity throughout Africa are similar to, if not the same as, those cited by the Limba. If the problem is to be resolved, the African church must learn to take traditionalists and their concerns seriously and show appropriate respect. Unfortunately the staunchest upholders of Euro-American Christian traditions are usually African church leaders and scholars.

In Africa, Islam shares a strong affinity with ATR. In spite of this, the church has for a very long time now, preferred to maintain a strong culture of dialogue with the Muslims, even to the point of accepting that the two traditions worship the same God. However, they have failed to establish such a dialogue with a religion that emanates from Sub-Saharan Africa. The establishment of dialogue is essential to resolving the problem.

I believe all is not lost. There is hope. I am optimistic that if the Christians and scholars put away biases, and idealism, and instead come together realistically with traditionalists, it is possible to put an end to this age-old problem. It will take time but gradually the African Christian problem may become a thing of the past.

Concluding Remarks

My approach and strategy has produced results among the Limba people in the NPLC. For that reason this study is worth considering. The methods I used to discuss the problem with the Limba may be applied to almost any ethnic group in Africa.46 If this is done, similar results may be achieved elsewhere.

It is helpful to read and be conversant with scholarly interpretation and understanding of the African Christian problem, but it is far more helpful and necessary to meet with traditionalists and Christians in Africa to see, experience and interpret this problem, and the major issues for dialogue. Although successful dialogue is not dependent on an ethnic connection, I believe that I received a high level of cooperation and respect from the groups I worked with because I too am a Limba and have, at times, personally been a part of each group. I believe it will be very helpful if other African scholars can make similar efforts with their respective ethnic groups and churches. More importantly, I encourage the African churches, missionaries, and those interested in the church in Africa, to treat African culture and religion seriously, and to find time to study the concerns of both the traditionalists and Christians to achieve dialogue and mutual understanding. It is through this understanding that we can hope the African Christian problem will be resolved.

Footnotes

[1] Joel B. Kailing, "A New Solution to the African Christian Problem." *Missiology: An International Review* 22:4 (1994), pp. 489-506 (p. 489).
[2] This term refers to those who practice both systems – Traditional Religion and Christianity.
[3] This refers to those dedicated Christians who reject traditional religious practices outright.
[4] The NPLC is the largest and only separatist/independent Limba Church to which the majority of Limba Christians and Christian Limbas belong.
[5] See John S. Mbiti, "Challenges facing religious education and research in Africa: the case of dialogue between Christianity and African Religion", *Religion and Theology* 3:1 (1996), pp. 170-79 (pp. 174-75) for a list of some of the African and expatriate scholars who have addressed the encounter between ATR and Christianity.
[6] John Mbiti, "Christianity and African Culture", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 1 (September 1977), pp 26-40 (p. 30-31).
[7] Keith E. Eitel, "Contextualization: Contrasting African Voices", *Criswell Theological Review* 2:2 (1988), pp. 323-34 (p. 334).
[8] Ibid.
[9] Robert G. Rogers, "Biblical Hermeneutics and Contemporary African Theology", in *Uncovering Ancient Stones: Essays in Memory of H. Neil Richardson*, edited by Lewis M. Hopfe (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1994), pp. 323-34 (p. 334).
[10] Ibid: p. 259.
[11] Carl Sundberg feels that these scholarly Christologies do not express the grassroots Traditionalists' conception of Christ. See *Conversion and Contextual Conceptions of Christ: A Missiological Study among Young Converts in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo* (Lund, Sweden: Team Offset & Media, 2000), p. 14.
[12] Aylward Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor: An Approach to Healing and Wholeness* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985).
[13] For example see, Kwame Bediako, "Jesus in African culture: A Ghanian Perspective," in *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology*, edited by William A. Dryness, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 96-104; Sundberg, *Conversion*, p.17.
[14] Sundberg, *Conversion*, p.14.
[15] Z. Nthamburi, *African Church at the Crossroads: Strategy for Indigenisation* (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1991), pp.61-64.
[16] See Sundberg, *Conversion*, p. 22; Bediako, "Jesus in African culture", pp. 115-116.
[17] Bediako, "Jesus in African culture", pp. 106-110.
[18] Robert J. Schreiter, (editor), *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002).
[19] See Mbiti, "Christianity and Traditional Religions in Africa", *International Review of Mission* 59:1 (1970), pp. 430-40, *The Crisis of Mission in Africa* (Mukono: Uganda Church Press, 1971), "Christianity and African Culture"; Kailing, "A New Solution"; Tite Tienou, "The state of the gospel in Africa", *Evangelical Missions Quarterly 27* (2001), pp. 154-62.
[20] Thomas Ryan, "Catholic Perspectives on Interreligious Relations", WCC *Current Dialogue* 44 (2004), pp. 18-27, (p. 19).
[21] WCC, *Current Dialogue*, p. 4. The WCC booklet on "Ecumenical Considerations: For Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions" (2003) is very helpful in giving us a brief update on current inter-religious relations and dialogue, helpful guidelines on approaching religious plurality, some guiding principles and practical considerations in inter-religious dialogue.
[22] Hans Ucko, "Editorial", *WCC Current Dialogue* 45 (2005), pp. 2-3 (p. 2).
[23] Tienou, "State of the Gospel", p. 161.
[24] J. Omosade Awolalu, "The Encounter Between African Traditional Religion and Other Religions in Nigeria", in *African Traditional Religion in Contemporary Society*, edited by Jacob K. Olupona (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1991), p. 111.
[25] Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), p. 7.
[26] Momodu Turay (Interviewed July 2002: Kamabai Town).
[27] Mbiti, *The Crisis of Mission*, p. 1.
[28] Byang H. Kato, "Christianity as an African Religion", *Evangelical Review of Theology* 4:1 (1980), pp. 31-39. (1980, p. 33).

[29] Ibid: p. 35.
[30] Gilbert W. Olson, *Church Growth in Sierra Leone* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1969), p. 192.
[31] Taylor, *The Primal Vision*, p. 16.
[32] Ibid: p. 13.
[33] McKenzie, *Inter-religious Encounters in West Africa* (Leicester: University of Leicester, 1976), p. 14.
[34] E. Bolaji Idowu, *Towards an indigenous Church* (London: OUP, 1965), p. 22.
[35] Charles H. Kraft, "Christianity and Culture in Africa", Facing the New Challenges 1:7 (1978), p. 285-91 (p. 288),
[36] Yelie Conteh (Interviewed June 2002: Freetown).
[37] Nthamburi, *African Church*, p. i.
[38] Byang H. Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa* (Achimota, Ghana: African Christian Press, 1987), p. 19.
[39] Ryan, "Catholic Perspectives", p. 21.
[40] Edward G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (London: Sheldon, 1962), p. 18; Magesa, *African Religion*, p. 22.
[41] Magesa, *African Religion*, p. 22.
[42] Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985), p. 145.
[43] Ibid: p. 144.
[44] Olson, *Church Growth*, p. 192.
[45] See Conteh, *Fundamental concepts*, for a comprehensive study on this issue.
[46] As we know by now, although ATR is one in its essence, with a basic world-view, which is fundamentally the same throughout Africa, it is rather tribal, regional or national (John S. Mbiti, African Religion and Philosophy [London: Heinemann, 1989], p. 4).

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Reflections from around the world

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When you Get to the Edge of the Abyss, Step Back

The Muslim World – the Victim of Terrorism

Hans Ucko

Christians and Muslims share a history of good memories and bitter conflict. The Christian-Muslim dialogue is one way of recalling together times of communities living in peace with each other but it also offers space for listening to stories and experiences replete with painful memories of controversy and rift conditioning the present. While we in gratitude to God should remember the good memories, we should also not be afraid to address instances of conflict in our common history and in our present living together. We want to open new doors in dialogue because we believe that this is the only way that we can truly find ways towards respect for each other, together stand up for human dignity and work for peace. We want to deepen our dialogue so that we enter into the heart of the matter, the ultimate concern in each of our religious traditions.

These days we are given the space to address a very complex and difficult question. Is the Muslim world today a victim of terrorism and what do we as Christians have to say about it? I think this question more than many others needs to be part of the dialogue between Christians and Muslims. But it is a topic fraught with sensitivities. That is why I have given my presentation the title: WHEN YOU GET TO THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS, STEP BACK. We are at the edge of the abyss today, the abyss of mistrust, hardening positions, a time when stereotypes are hardly gainsaid, when we are not walking the second mile with our neighbour, something which is increasingly necessary if we are not to fall down into the abyss. At the edge of the abyss, step back and look for another perspective. Do not look down into the abyss. We might become dizzy and fall down and perish. Instead, we need another perspective, which focuses our eyes on a goal at the other side of the abyss, where we can help each other to be faithful and hopeful.

In a way it would be easy to answer the question whether the Muslim world is a victim of terrorism. It is enough to say: watch the news! In Iraq Sunni suicide bombers and Shiite death squad terrorize the population. Holy shrines are crumbling over people in prayer and the streets are filled with blood and body parts. People are found in mass graves with signs of execution. The breakdown and disintegration of an entire country hangs heavy in the air.

The terror in Iraq is already beyond our grasp. It is too much and yet it is as if there is still more to come, as if we had not seen anything yet, as if we were still waiting for it all to fall apart, where voices of moderation are no longer heard. For the time being, in this time of great anguish, people try to take solace in and listen intently to the lone voice of that serene man, the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who provides a canvas on which the Iraqi Shia community as well as anyone else in Iraq could paint another future than the one which is their daily experience.

How can we step back from the abyss that now seems to stare us in the eyes, the fratricide killing and conflict between Shiites and Sunnis? Who is stoking the fire? What can be done?

By the title for this conference the organizers have indicated that this meeting is not only to address whether the Muslim world is a victim of intra-Muslim terrorism. From the text accompanying the invitation it becomes clear

that another aspect needs to be addressed as well. Is the Muslim world, Muslims, Islam itself the victim of terrorism? Has the "war on terror", proclaimed by the Bush administration in 2001 led to a war on Muslims and Islam, in which the entire Muslim world has become a victim?

Since the events of 9/11, there seems to be a drive to divide the world between 'those who are with us' and 'those who are against us'. The world has been divided. A climate of fear and suspicion has enveloped the world. If those who wish to prevent the realisation of this nightmare do not concretely oppose this pernicious philosophy, it may become a self-fulfilling prophecy with all that it might entail. At the edge of an abyss, step back! We lived for decades with the threat of a devastating clash between the West and the Communist bloc. After the implosion of the Soviet bloc we have been witnessing how another enemy of the West is being constructed. It is as if we were not able to live without a real or imaginable enemy. The philosophy of a clash of civilizations has been elaborated as the Weltanschauung of our time, the comprehensive conception or apprehension of the world. This is to succeed the balance of terror between the West and the USSR during the Cold War. The Bush administration's "enduring" war on terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq, has all served to reinforce the widespread perception that Islam in itself is in some special way linked to terrorist violence. Islam is seen as having a predilection for violence and is defined as inherently violent and one of the primary sources of contemporary violence in the world. It is in this context that we refer to the universally known and quoted writings by Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order". But the depiction of Islam as an inherently violent religion does not end here. There is an alarming amount of anti-Islamic literature published after 9/11. The very titles of many of these works make you realise how much the clash of civilizations is alive as a leit-motif, "*American Jihad: The Terrorists Among Us"* (Steven Emerson, 2002) or Daniel Pipes, *Militant Islam Reaches America* (2002). Similar works brand American Muslims critical of Israeli policies as potential terrorist threats. Others incite suspicion against American Muslims claiming that they are taking part in a secret conspiracy to promote terrorism in America.

Some Christian and political leaders are heard or read labelling Islam as inherently violent. Their comments go beyond what is called Islamic fundamentalism. Islam is targeted explicitly or implicitly. The civilization threatening our civilization is said to be not only Islamic fundamentalism but Islam itself. It is portrayed as the enemy that has to be defeated. Scholars, thinkers and academics, clergy stand up and declare that Islam is the enemy of the West. Islam is seen as the continuation of the eternal enemy of the West. Islam is understood as "Islamo-fascism", which is "yet another mutation of the totalitarian disease we defeated first in the shape of Nazism and fascism and then in the shape of Communism; it is global in scope…"[i] Another writer, Sam Harris continues: "Mainstream Islam itself represents an extremist rejection of intellectual honesty, gender equality, secular politics and genuine pluralism".[ii] He continues in another article: "It is time we admitted that we are not at war with "terrorism"; we are at war with precisely the vision of life that is prescribed to all Muslims in the Koran."[iii]

The denigration of Islam in the West has had consequences. If I were to ask in the West about the feelings they would have when I say: "He is a real Christian" or he is a real Muslim", I am sure most of the people I asked would get positive associations regarding the real Christian: He is someone who is good, generous, open and kind. "The real Muslim" would however bring forth associations of fear, envisaging a terrorist image. It has almost become a saying: "Not all Muslims are terrorists but all terrorists are Muslims."

The 'war on terror' has had devastating consequences. Maybe one reason in spite of the concreteness of terror itself is that the

enemy 'terror' nevertheless is too vague. It is a war against an enemy without a face; a war on terror fails to realise that terror is a tactic and not an enemy. We do not really see the face of the enemy "terror" we are supposed to fight. The war on terror risks leading us into the use of too blunt weapons and too wide definitions of who the enemy is.

The proclaimed war on terror has an addressee in Islamic fundamentalism but the ball does not end there. As if by association Islam itself is made a target. The clash between the protagonists of the Cold War was different from the altercations between the West and Islam. Although Communism posed a threat to the West, it was an economic or at best a political ideology without deep roots in people's souls and consciousness. Islam, like Christianity, Hinduism or Buddhism is a religion, which has profound roots in the consciousness of hundreds of millions of adherents.

The thin line between the war on terror and how this touches upon Islam itself has made millions of Muslims apprehensive as to the real intention of those who declared and defend the war on terror. Insecurity and defensiveness will surface interchangeably as the only way to protect oneself. You dig your heels in and your eyes go from one side to the other, prepared for yet another attack. And the longer it goes on, the more one's defence-system hardens. Unlike secular ideologies, religions tend to get stronger as result of persecution. The best way to deal with religious fundamentalism is not to wage a war against it, but to remove or moderate its influence through rational arguments, preferably borrowed from the same religious discourse from which they emerge. This is what happened in the West during the Reformation and the Age of Enlightenment, and this is what needs to be done in Islam, by Muslims themselves. That is why the effort of the US to export democracy so far has not succeeded. It needs to grow out of the people, the democracy they need in order for all in a particular context to live with freedom and equal opportunities.

At a time when there are rumours of another war, this time against Iran, on equally dubious grounds that led to the invasion of Iraq, the time has come for all people of goodwill to raise their voices louder against such an insane venture. When you get to the edge of the abyss, step back!

The whole history of 800 years of coexistence between Islam and Hinduism and Buddhism in India; the coexistence of Muslims, Christians and Jews in Spain; the coexistence of Muslims and followers of other faiths in Iran, Turkey, Egypt, etc show that it is possible for people from different religions or civilizations to live peacefully together. Based on old experiences of that which was good for us all, may these times give us new ideas.

It certainly looks as if the Muslim world is a victim of terrorism. Where do we go from here? While realising that Islam has become a particular victim of terrorism in many ways, it is equally important to see this fact within the reality of the whole world as a victim of terrorism. It is, say those who know it, the weapon of the poor, which then should prompt us to address the situation of the poor in the world and do so together. The fact that terrorism is a weapon of the poor, does not take the pain away from those who, without suspicion, find their dear ones maimed and butchered, homes destroyed, and livelihood capsized. But, as we know, there is no lull: terrorism continues to be a useful tactic, particularly in the form of suicide attacks, which "suggest to the target society that their enemy is not a rational actor with a particular set of political ideals, but a compulsive and volatile force, ready to pay the ultimate price to achieve victory. In this manner, the apparent fanaticism of the attacker brings its own rewards to the terrorist group. Similarly and somewhat counter-intuitively, the apparent desperation of the attacker can raise the moral standing of the group, as the suicidal aspect connotes not the cowardice or cynicism of a conventional terrorist attack, but rather points to the frustration of last resort. These factors are force multipliers."[iv] One

task for interreligious dialogue and cooperation must be to find ways out of this spiral of violence together.

It is difficult to read the mind of the perpetrator of terror as well as of the victim of terror. I have to probe deeper. We are at the abyss as victims of terrorism. When you get to the edge of the abyss, step back! There is a risk that we only look upon ourselves as victims. There is a risk that we are being reduced to and reduce ourselves to one identity, the one of the victim. My identity is defined over against the other. When people are elevating their identity as a banner or looking for ways of either inventing or reinventing ethnicity, enemies are essential.

In our time we are living through many vehement assertions of identity and are constantly exposed to the formation of group identities over against a common enemy. A particular politics of identity based on a sense of victimization, reducing identity to a single affiliation, facilitates the creation of "identities that kill", says Amin Maalouf.[v] We see it often. The resentment of the West in many parts of the Arab world, the frustration against the US for its foreign policy in relation to some Arab states and Israel feeds enormous resentment. Migrants and Gastarbeiter, even those for several generations in Europe, feel marginalised. It furthers a self-image and identity, which is only defined as underdog or victim. The reaction is self-marginalisation and in the end, when there is no longer any hope or future visible, or no light in the tunnel, an explosion of violence. When my self-image is one of a victim, the whole field of vision is narrowed down and the horizon is lost. One does not find one's way out. The response to perceived victimhood is likely to go over board, be too much or be misdirected, the end result is that the gates of the prison of mind remain closed. It suits the oppressor if s/he can keep me so preoccupied with my situation that I cannot raise my eyes and see my salvation. "The most powerful weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed", as Steve Bantu Biko rightly said it.

There is thus a risk in living with a self-image that is fed not by dialogue but by one channel alone, one's own frustrations. Stereotypes abound, labelling becomes the easiest way out. That is why my final point is to advocate more dialogue between people, between Christians and Muslims so that we can come close enough to each other that we can shed stereotypes. It is with this in mind that I, while in Tehran, would like to underline that the present lack of relationship between Jews and Iran is something that needs to be addressed the sooner the better. Stereotypes abound leading to nowhere but to the abyss.
Christians and the West constitute equally difficult concepts, likely to lead to a dangerous amalgamation. We must therefore arrive at driving a wedge between the too easy identification between Christians and the West. While it is true that the West is for ever linked to a Christian heritage, it is not its only heritage. While it is true that Christians in the West will have to shoulder the history of Christianity in the West and in relation to other parts of the world, the West and Christians today are not identical entities. Christians today, in the West, have to struggle to find new ground for being Christian in a post-modern world, in a world where the heritage of being Christian weighs heavily on the possibilities to reassess what it means to be Christian.

We need a dialogue between us, a dialogue that is strong enough to cope with ups and downs. It must be merciful enough that it enables us to function with each other as in the story of the Good Samaritan, not as an act of pity but as an at of solidarity, an act of sister- and brotherhood. It is a normal thing to do. It says in the Gospel of Luke: "But a Samaritan while travelling came near the man who was wounded; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him" (Lk10:33, 34). This task is now the task of Christians whenever they see that their Muslim neighbour has become a victim of terrorism. This would apply to when Islam

is defamed through cartoons, when Muslim immigrants are denied dignity in society and when there is no one willing to listen to grievances of Muslim men and women, whether in the West or in Muslims countries. Muslims should not become victims of terrorism. The only victim of terrorism should be terrorism.

[i] Norman Podhoretz: The Case for Bombing Iran. Commentary, June 2007, http://www.commentarymagazine.com/cm/main/viewArticle.html?id=10882&page=all
[ii] On the Reality of Islam, http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/20060207_reality_islam/
[iii] Sam Harris: Bombing our illusions, October 2005, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sam-harris/bombing-our-illusions_b_8615.html
[iv] David Ucko and Christopher Langton, "Suicide Attacks – A Tactical Weapon System", International Institute for Strategic Studies, 24 April 2002, http://www.iiss.org/staffexpertise/list-experts-by-name/colonel-christopher-langton-/recent-articles/suicide-attacks--a-tactical-weapon-system
[v] *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*, By Amin Maalouf. Translated by Barbara Bray. New York: Arcade Publishing, 2000.

Hans Ucko, acting Director of Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation of the WCC gave this address in a somewhat edited version in Tehran, Iran in May 2007 at an interreligious and inter-cultural conference entitled "The Muslim World – A Victim of Terrorism". The conference was held under the auspices of Director General of the World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thoughts, Ayatollah Mohammad-Ali Taskhiri.



Talking FAITH

Talking Faith opens a window into the lives of Sarah and Azam. Two friends living the post 9/11 realities where Islam gets associated with militarism and Christian minorities face a backlash by the extremists.

Their faiths are different, one is Muslim and the other Christian, but what they share is huge!

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The Tension Between the Ideal of Non-Violence and Actual Practice: Gandhi in Context

Israel Selvanayagam

Re-Reading Western Appreciation for Gandhi

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), known as *Mahatma* (Great Soul), the father of independent India, is acclaimed as the embodiment of non-violence. His experiments with Truth and the claim of 'my act speaks unerringly' have attracted westerners who have found in him a 'very human saint' with 'rock-like integrity' (John Hick). In this article we take the appreciation of the American Catholic Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1915-1968) with reference to his anecdotes and selection of Gandhi's writings on non-violence (Merton, *Gandhi on Non-Violence,* New York: New Directions Paperback, 1965- *page numbers in brackets**). This may prove to be a worthwhile contribution to the ongoing discussion on truth and reconciliation in interfaith dialogue.

Let us start with Merton's concluding observation in his preamble:

Gandhi's 'vow of truth' and all the other ashram vows, which were the necessary preamble to the awakening of a mature political consciousness, must be seen for what they are: not simply ascetic and devotional indulgences that may possibly suit the fancy of a few religious pacifists and confused poets, but precepts fundamentally necessary if man is to recover his right mind (20).

For Gandhi, non-violence (*ahimsa*) is a basic law of life. It is the only true force of life, a fundamental principle of being. It is the goal of human life and identical with love, truth and God. Rather than simply repeating Gandhi's well-known views, we will consider their relevance for today's world, and particularly for India.

The distilled wisdom of thinkers and mystics can be just good bed-time reading. The force of their appeal however needs to be measured by their ability to stimulate and guide those who are actively involved in the heat and dust of a commitment to transform the world. Gandhi's sayings have acquired an almost scriptural value as they are read along with other religious scriptures in interfaith meetings that involve Gandhians. However, the exigency of such sayings can raise disturbing questions when the dilemmas, difficulties and tensions are acknowledged.

Peace without justice is superficial, and experiments in the Truth of Life, without being truthful about basic historical realities, is misleading. No doubt, Gandhi's non-violence has inspired many around the world to have a new outlook on life, and new attitude to certain issues. At the same time it has been used by those who continue to oppress the poor and exploit the innocent. Many Indians have preferred the 'easy way' of seeing Gandhi as a sort of incarnation of God to be lined up with figures such as Buddha and Jesus, rather than the 'hard way' of following his footsteps. In the course of our discussion it will be clear that what Christians have done in separating Jesus from his socio-economic context and Jewish religious tradition, so Hindus have done similarly: Gandhians and admirers of Gandhi also have tended to separate Gandhi from his socio-political-religious context, and all the complexities that he encountered in one of the most exciting and decisive periods of India's history. It is not surprising then that Merton is no different.

Religious Commitment

Let no one be mistaken: Gandhi was a staunch *Vaishnava* Hindu, and Hindu apologist. The last word on his lips when he fell to the bullets of his assassin was 'Ram' - his personal deity, a divine hero, one of the incarnations of Vishnu. Of course he explained that, for him, Ram was another name for God, whilst Kingdom of God he called *ramrajya*; but it is hard to believe that his choice of the word *Ram* was nothing to do with his passionate adherence to the Ram cult within the *Vaishnava* sect. Moreover, he used words such as *dharma*, one of the most popular terms of the Brahmanic Hindu tradition, which has a variety of connotations ranging from the ritual-oriented, caste-connected Vedic social order, to a lifestyle characterised by justice and love.

Gandhi came to know the Sanskrit scripture, *Bhagavad Gita*, through an English translation, which he soon translated into Gujarati, projecting it as the essential Hindu Bible. This countered the Christian and Muslim claim of one God and one Scripture, a claim which in turn challenged Hindus who were seen to adhere to many gods and many scriptures. We will point out how Gandhi's quite extraordinary view of the Gita provided him with key words and ideas. Finally, we will point out the need for re-reading the Gita and the Bible in light of this discussion of non-violence.

True Independence

For Gandhi, true independence in the Kingdom of God should be 'political' (the removal of the control of the British army), 'economic' (entire freedom from the British capitalists and capital, as also from their Indian counterparts) and 'moral' (freedom from armed defence forces). Perhaps it is the moral independence that has a universal appeal for Westerners like Merton. He writes:

One of the great lessons of Gandhi's life remains this: through the spiritual traditions of the West he, an Indian, discovered his Indian heritage and with it his own 'right mind.' And in his fidelity to his own heritage and spiritual sanity, he was able to show men of the West and of the whole world a way to recover their 'right mind' in their own tradition, thus manifesting the fact that there are certain indisputable and essential values – religious, ethical, ascetic, spiritual, and philosophical – which man has everywhere needed and which he has in the past managed to acquire, values without which he cannot live, values which are now in large measure lost to him so that, unequipped to face life in a fully human manner, he now runs the risk of destroying himself entirely (4).

To balance this moral ideal, we have to recognise certain historical factors. First, it is not actually true that Gandhi achieved independence through his ideal of *ahimsa.* Such assumption might give solace to the British - from whom political independence was gained - and pride to Indians for whom Gandhi came to embody all the best in Indian culture. The national, regional and local uprisings and bloody battles in India, the fact of British lethargy after the Second World War, and the return to power in Britain of the Labour Party, jointly contributed to the achievement of Indian independence. We need to suspect the motivation of those writers who have projected Gandhi as being the primary cause of achieving independence, with his moral ideal of non-violence. Though he was certainly a central actor in that process, symbolically of great significance, did he posthumously steal the show in the way he is usually depicted?

On the economic front, Gandhi stood for developing rural resources in a rural way, such as using the spinning hand-wheel that guaranteed a non-violent approach: He saw something inherently violent in industrialisation, which may be debated separately in light of both the success and failure of the mixed economy adopted by the first round of Indian leaders, including Jawaharlal Nehru, in independent India. What is important to note here is that thinkers like J.C. Kumarappa - a colleague of Gandhi who presented a vision of 'Mother Economy' far more realistic than Gandhi's - were overshadowed by Gandhi. So

also champions like Ambedkar - an opponent of Gandhi in dealing with the liberation of the Dalits - and V.S. Azariah, an Indian Christian leader who viewed religious conversion at grass-root level as vital for social transformation of rural India. Again we need to note that western writers on Gandhi have rarely tried to delve behind Gandhi and find the alternative visions that would have helped present a truer picture of Gandhi. Merton is no exception.

Dalits and Non-Violence

Dalits (officially known as 'Scheduled Caste') form nearly seventeen per cent of the Indian population. They are the greatest victims of the caste system. Gandhi accepted the suggestion made by a journalist to call them *Harijan*, 'people of God'. Merton notes that Gandhi identified 'not with the Westernized upper classes nor with the Brahmin caste, but rather with the outcaste "untouchable", or *Harijan*'(5). He also notes that:

Gandhi adds an interesting commentary to this: "Hinduism excludes all exploitation" (hence it follows implicitly that the caste structure, in so far as it rested upon a basis of crass injustice toward the Harijan, was in fact a denial of the basic truth of Hinduism). Gandhi's sense of Hindu dharma demanded, then, that this be made clear and that all Hindus should collaborate in setting things right. This fundamental re-establishment of justice was essential if India was to have the inner unity, strength, and freedom to profit by its own political liberation (9).

Merton was probably not aware of the multiplicity of scriptural traditions from which Gandhi had to make sense. Strangely, Gandhi opposed the caste system as it had developed, but championed the original structure of four *varnas* (literally colour groups), which in Hindu tradition was the prototype of a caste system. If the original is evident in the ancient scriptures of the *Vedas* it is not at all difficult to read there that the *varna* system was divisive, hierarchical and discriminating, particularly in dealing with power, both ritual and socio-economic. Some Hindu law-givers strictly prohibited the lowest caste group even hearing the reading from the Vedas, let alone performing of Vedic rituals. Punishment ranges from stuffing ears with lead to cutting the head twine. Gandhi rejected such law codes but, without touching the Vedas, he took refuge in the Gita as his ultimate source. In the Gita, Krishna says that he created four castes and applied different mind-sets and characteristics to them. However, he says, he would accept the low-born *Vashyas*, *Shudras* and women if they approach him in true devotion. There is no doubt that at different periods, many individuals who have been gripped by this devotional spirit have tried to practice the new code and resist caste distinctions. The reality is, though, that a system has remained intact in Indian life, one ramification being that more than four thousand castes are officially recognised today, with even more expected.

So far we have mentioned the castes and the plight of the lowest of them. Still worse has been the plight of the Dalits, the outcaste and untouchable. They continue to struggle for their liberation in the course of which sometimes violence seems to be unavoidable: Those who apply the theory of using lesser violence to challenge the greater violence condone such acts. It is true that Gandhi participated in the struggle for temple entry for Dalits in a few places.

It is also true he declared that 'untouchability is a crime against God and humanity'; but how to punish the criminals so as to establish equality, is a question Gandhi never asked. He wanted to purify Hinduism of the blot of untouchability, and asked caste Hindus to make atonement for this sin by allowing the untouchables into temples and other public places. He warned them that if they did not come forward to destroy the heinous practice of untouchability, there was going to be a fierce fight between caste Hindus and *Harijans.* He also warned that they would destroy Hinduism, and placed himself in the forefront to raze them to the ground as though with dynamite if all the *Harijans* were united behind him.

Gandhi's promotion of the title *Harijan* appeared to be a great gesture, but it raised doubts in thinking minds. To translate it as 'people of God' is far-fetched because the word *Hari* in the tradition normally means *Vishnu* and a few of his incarnations, including Krishna and Ram, the personal deity of Gandhi. Today, Dalits point out the treacherous act of Ram, the epic hero of *Ramayana*, who killed a low caste man for daring to perform a Vedic ritual, thus violating the rule. Moreover, the word *Harijan* has the connotation of children born of temple prostitutes. The temple prostitutes system (*Devadasi*), in spite of a legal ban, still exists in pockets of India and interestingly the majority of those who dedicate their girls for this divine vocation are *Harijans*. Perhaps Gandhi overlooked this cultural reality. In any case the awakened community rejected this term and chose the word Dalit, meaning 'broken' or 'split open,' as a term more truly describing their experience of suffering.

The ambiguous position of Gandhi on *varna*, caste and untouchability, which the Dalits see as a calculated and cunning betrayal of their cause, was vividly exposed when Bhimarao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956), the twentieth-century champion of Dalit liberation, opposed Gandhi head on. Ambedkar stood for the annihilation of the caste system, which alone promised abolition of untouchability. Following his representation of the Dalits in the first round table conference held in London in 1930, the British government announced the 'Communal Award'. Accordingly, the Dalits were given dual voting rights, with which they would elect their own candidate through the first vote in the areas where they are heavily populated and through the second vote elect a common representative. Gandhi opposed this award which appeared to him as another divide-and-rule policy of the British, that would bring about the disintegration of the Hindu community. When his letters to the government were not taken seriously he declared a fast unto death. Ambedkar was in a great dilemma: Whether to shame Gandhi or to protect the rights of the Dalits? Then there was the fear that if the 'old national saint' died there would be riots and killing, and the losers would be the Dalits. Hence his agreement to a compromise that resulted into the famous Poona Act.

Caste and untouchability continue to be a menace in India today. Belying the expectation that globalisation will abolish it, caste is itself being globalised. Hindus have reason to be grateful to Gandhi for his confused stand in not seeing the inextricable connection between the Gita, the law codes and the Vedas, and between *varna*, caste and untouchability. Dalits have reason to suspect the real intentions of Gandhi. Gandhi's ideal of non-violence has a limited appeal to both groups as the Dalit struggle for liberation has taken the international stage.

At this juncture, it should be noted that Gandhi did not appreciate religious conversion as a form of protest and non-cooperation with an unjust caste system. Conversion was the last option for Ambedkar and his followers to embarrass Gandhi and other Hindus, and after serious consideration they chose Buddhism. Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah (1875-1945), the first Indian bishop was involved in 'humanising' and converting poor Dalits in Andhra Pradesh. Gandhi fiercely criticised him, but he refused to accept his invitation to go and see the kind of people who were converting to Christianity in the dust and heat of the villages. Such conversion from Hinduism to other religious traditions - including Buddhism, Christianity and Islam - has continued in India. Gandhi's aversion to conversion to Christianity was fuelled by stories of stupid acts, such as the converts being expected to eat beef and drink wine. Meanwhile Gandhi also spoke of conversion, but of a different kind. For example, he says: '*Satyagraha* is never vindictive. It believes not in destruction but in conversion' (33). He asked people to follow their inner voice and act on it – which is always ambiguous: If that is the only or the main criterion it is hard to deny the act of suicide bombers who claim to hear the inner voice in the context of inhuman secularisation and structural forms of terrorism. Of course we would question such a connection.

The Effect of Gandhi's Fast

As a Hindu, Gandhi practiced public fasting as part of his *dharma*. He used it to draw the attention of and to mobilise the masses, though he never used it for his selfish interest. At the same time, Gandhi says: 'As an author of fasting as a weapon in *satyagraha* I must state that I cannot give up an opinion honestly held even if the whole world fasts against me. I might as well give up my belief in God because a body of atheists fasted against such belief' (58). It is a last resort when all other efforts have failed. 'There is no room for imitation in fasts. He who has no inner strength should not dream of it, and never with attachment to success. But if a *satyagrahi* once undertakes a fast from conviction, he must stick to his resolve whether there is a chance of his action bearing fruit or not.'(69)

In some Indian religious traditions, fast unto death is suicidal - and Buddhists criticised Jains for this. In the wake of their criticism of elaborate Vedic rituals, fast was prescribed as a substitute, which would be equally meritorious. Fast unto death and self-immolation are not uncommon in public in India, particularly with a view to oppose a decision or to gain one's way. Towards the end of his life, Gandhi wrote: 'I failed to recognise, until it was too late, that what I had mistaken for *ahimsa* was not *ahimsa*, but passive resistance of the weak, which can never be called *ahimsa* even in the remotest sense' (76). However, before his death in January 1948, he wrote: 'My fast should not be considered a political move in any sense of the term. It is obedience to the peremptory call of conscience and duty. It comes out of felt agony' (76).

Again, in the context of millions of poor Indians being forced to starve or semi-starve, when inflicting pain on oneself too was regarded as violence, it is very difficult to understand Gandhi's fast and its appeal to the poor masses of India.

Tensions and Dilemmas

Merton comments that:

In Gandhi's mind non-violence was not simply a political tactic which was supremely useful and efficacious in liberating his people from foreign rule, in order that India might then concentrate on realizing its own national identity. On the contrary, the spirit of non-violence sprang from an inner realization of spiritual unity in himself. The whole Gandhian concept of non-violent action and satyagraha is incomprehensible if it is thought to be a means of achieving unity rather than as the fruit of inner unity already achieved. (6).

Perhaps Gandhi in his humility might not have approved this acclamation. We have already noted he was aware of the option of violence in the struggle of Dalits for regaining their humanity. Further, for Gandhi *ahimsa* was an ideal which, starting from himself (he thought) would spread throughout India and reach every part of the world. He was clear in his mind when he said: 'When the practice of *ahimsa* becomes universal, God will reign on earth as He does in heaven' (7).

The substitute for violence, for Gandhi, is non-cooperation. 'Non-cooperation', he declared, 'is a protest against an unwitting and unwilling participation in evil' (19). But non-cooperation can harden the perpetrator of violence and increase repression. For example, Dalit non-cooperation with the maintenance of the system of bonded labour is a reason for further riots and repression. Should they and other vulnerable people suffer such oppressive system which itself is violent? In Gandhi, does the voice of the poor and hungry of Asia still speak, as Merton claims? (10)

For Gandhi, 'Crime is a disease like any other malady and is a product of the prevalent social system. Therefore (in a non-violent India) all crime including murder will be treated as a disease' (49). This perception lends itself to see the place of some form of violence - as in the case of surgery. Indeed, when non-violence with reference to the Gita was

debated, theologians like Ramanuja compared the pain of victims in these acts to the pain of a patient in the course of a surgical operation. In fulfilling a sacrificial duty - performance of Vedic ritual for a priest, and fighting in war for a warrior - Gandhi advocates that 'The *satyagrahi* should have no hatred towards his opponent, facing death cheerfully in the performance of one's duty (30). Can such an individual gesture be applicable to the experience of a victim community? Gandhi admitted that:

there will never be an army of perfectly non-violent people. It will be formed of those who will honestly endeavour to observe non-violence (27) It is not possible for a modern state based on force non-violently to resist forces of disorder, whether external or internal. A man cannot serve God and Mammon, not be temperate and furious at the same time (31). In life it is impossible to eschew violence completely. The question arises, where is one to draw the line? The line cannot be the same for everyone… Meat-eating is a sin for me. Yet for another person who has always lived on meat and never seen anything wrong in it, to give it up simply to copy me will be a sin (41).

But somehow this message has not reached the extremists who not only ridicule meat-eating but also target Muslims for slaughtering cows. Gandhi supported the cow-protection act and went on fast when thousands of rioters were slaughtered on the streets for this issue. Further, strictly speaking, according to Hindu belief, plants and shrubs also have soul. Yet for Gandhi, 'to allow crops to be eaten up by animals in the name of *ahimsa* while there is a famine in the land is certainly a sin' (41). The Muslim community will be pleased to see this grading extended to cover animal life in comparison with human life. Gandhi admits: 'I am not able to accept in its entirety the doctrine of non-killing of animals. I have no feeling in me to save the life of animals who devour and cause hurt to man. I consider it wrong to help in the increase of their progeny… To do away with monkeys where they have become a menace to the well-being of man is pardonable' (70). A strict Jain would think that Gandhi leaves room for justification of violence. For Gandhi, 'Non-cooperation in military service, and service in non-military matters are not compatible' (52). 'If non-violence does not appeal to your heart, you should discard it' (41). 'If the people are not ready for the exercise of the non-violence of the brave, they must be ready for the use of force in self-defence. There should be no camouflage… It must never be secret' (41). One can understand in this light that Gandhi condoned the Indian government's action of sending an army when, soon after independence, part of Kashmir was occupied by some Pakistani tribes. For Gandhi,

The first condition of non-violence is justice all around in every department of life. Perhaps it is too much to expect of human nature. I do not, however, think so. No one should dogmatize about the capacity of human nature for degradation or exaltation (66).

Behind Gandhi's statement lies a Christian notion of sinful human nature and the need for salvation through Christ. Thinkers like Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) declared that it was a sin to call a human being a sinner because, according to the Hindu view, every human being has a divine spark or soul which goes through a chain of births and deaths until it becomes liberated and gains a stage of equanimity and equipoise. Gandhi has been criticised by some Indian Christian theologians that he did not regard self-righteousness also as a sin and that the body at no stage need be a thing to be despised. Gandhi's adoption of renunciation at a late stage of his life could not have an appeal to the youth who would want to enjoy life in its full measure until the passions and instincts fade away in old age. However, it does have an appeal to those who are overwhelmed by consumer 'pleasure'. Further, if the true condition for non-violence is justice all around in every department of life, it is hard to ask the victims of injustice not to use any form of violence in self-defence and in pursuit of gaining a share of even an average life.

Strength of Heart and Faint of Spirit

Merton gives a fine interpretation of Gandhi's inner strength and the nature of true freedom:

True freedom is then inseparable from the inner strength which can assume the common burden of evil which weighs both on oneself and one's adversary. False freedom is only a manifestation of the weakness that cannot bear even one's own evil until it is projected on to the other and seen as exclusively his. The highest form of spiritual freedom is, as Gandhi believed, to be sought in the strength of heart, which is capable of liberating the oppressed and the oppressor together. But in any event, the oppressed must be able to be free within himself, so that he may begin to gain strength to pity his oppressor. Without that capacity for pity, neither of them will be able to recognise the truth of their situation: a common relationship in a common complex of sins (14f).

The implication of this interpretation is that all the oppressed can have the inner strength of heart and proximity to their oppressors. Of course they can have deep sighs and visions of hope but to expect them to have inner strength in all circumstances may not be realistic. For Gandhi, in non-violence 'bravery consists in dying, not in killing' (26). 'A non-violent state must be broad-based on the will of an intelligent people well able to know its mind and act up to it' (31). 'A non-violent man or woman will and should die without retaliation, anger or malice, in self-defence or in defending the honour of his women folk. This is the highest form of bravery.

If an individual or group of people are unable or unwilling to follow this great law of life, retaliation or resistance unto death is the second best, though a long way off from the first. Cowardice is impotence worse than violence. The coward desires revenge but being afraid to die, he looks to others, maybe to the government of the day, to do the work of defence for him. A coward is less than a man. He does not deserve to be a member of a society of men and women' (33). 'Non-violence is not a cover for cowardice, but it is the supreme virtue of the brave… Cowardice is wholly inconsistent with non-violence… Non-violence presupposes ability to strike' (36) 'There is nothing more demoralising than fake non-violence of the weak and impotent' (41). 'A weak man is just by accident. A strong but non-violent man is unjust by accident' (47). 'A weak-minded man can never be a *satyagrahi*' (54). '*Ahimsa* calls for the strength and courage to suffer without retaliation, to receive blows without returning any. But it does not exhaust its meaning. Silence becomes cowardice when occasion demands speaking out the whole truth and acting accordingly' (58).

This ideal raises many questions in the Indian context. Are all the poor and illiterate, the majority of the Indian population, weak and impotent? When they are crushed by the oppressive structures of religions and social structures, should we ask them to endure blow after blow and insult after insult? Perhaps Gandhi was not expecting them to do so – once they had recognised the power of *satyagraha*. In fact most of them do and, arguably, with their subsequent frustration and anguish added, they have to endure the double weight that is forced upon them.

What is often happening in the context of people's movements in India, and elsewhere too, is that while the oppressor is unwilling to move an inch, the oppressed are exhorted to adopt non-violence. Any uprising is regarded not only as against the principle of non-violence but also against the State's law and order, which unfortunately has to be maintained by authorities who side with the oppressors either for gain or from fear of threats.

It is the Hebrew scripture that projects the poor and oppressed as weak, faint of heart, with broken spirit and so on, a people with whom God identifies and on whose behalf God challenges the strong and the oppressors. God asks the prophets and other servants to expose the secret plans of the oppressor and be the voice for the voiceless. The oppressor's repentance and reparation are called for. It was

in this vein that Jesus started his Sermon on the Mount declaring 'Blessed are the poor in spirit (or wounded psyche), for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. This sermon was a favourite of Gandhi, seeing in it not only the quintessence of the Gita and true Hinduism, but of true religion itself. Today, following the abolition of apartheid in South Africa and procedures of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, what is emphasised is not retributive justice but restorative justice in which reparation is essential. As the Chairman of the Commission, Desmond Tutu later declared, 'there is no future without forgiveness', but it is to be preceded by the repentance and confession of the perpetrator of violence. And there is no truth and freedom without remembering the past. What healing is possible, though, is to remove the poisonous toxin from that memory. Then the question is whether Gandhi's point of reference - such as non-violence as the law of life, truth and God - can appeal simultaneously to the oppressors and the oppressed.

Image of God for India

Merton observes that non-violence, for Gandhi, bears witness to the chief truth of Hinduism: 'The belief that *all* life (not only human but all sentient beings) is one, i.e., all life coming from the One universal source, call it Allah, God or Parameshwara'(8). But students of the dynamics of the Hindu religious traditions know that this is the view of one particular school of thought and it is unfair to cover the whole of Hindu religious traditions with this blanket. We have already noted that Gandhi himself has made a distinction between the life of humans, animals and crops. As a Vaishanavite, Gandhi did believe in the unfailing assistance of God for a non-violent resister, sustaining through insurmountable problems.

The votary of non-violence has to cultivate his capacity for sacrifice of the highest type in order to be free from fear… He who has not overcome all fear cannot practice *ahimsa* to perfection. The votary of *ahimsa* has only one fear, that is God. He who seeks refuge in God ought to have a glimpse of the *Atman* (the transcendent self) that transcends the body; and the moment one has glimpsed the imperishable *Atman* one sheds the love of the perishable body…Violence is needed for the protection of the *Atman*, for the protection of one's honour (38). A *satyagrahi* is dead to his body even before his enemy attempts to kill him, i.e., he is free from attachment to his body and only lives in the victory of his soul. Therefore when he is already thus dead, why should he yearn to kill anyone? To die in the act of killing is in essence to die defeated (46f).

Without realising this background, Merton comments on the ultimate surrender to the will of God: 'Surrender to the demands of that *dharma*, to the sacred needs of the *Harijan* (outcastes, untouchables) and of all India was purely and simply surrender to God and to His will, manifested in the midst of the people' (8). At a mature stage, Gandhi claimed that to hear the inner voice of God and surrender to his will was his greatest joy.

Gandhi believed in prayer which was for him the root of *satyagraha* and a '*satyagrahi* relies upon God for protection against the tyranny of brute force' (30). At the same time, in his understanding of God's involvement we seem to see the Gita's view of the invulnerable soul, the chain of births and deaths, and the pre-determination of death. In order to persuade the despondent Arjuna in the battle field Krishna tells him that all those to be killed by him have already been killed and his responsibility as a warrior is to fight and kill. Gandhi said, 'No man can stop violence. God alone can do so. Men are but instruments in His hands. The deciding factor is God's grace. He works according to His law and therefore violence will also be stopped in accordance with that law. Man does not and can never know God's law fully. Therefore we have to try as far as lies in our power' (31f). This view is of course completely different from the Judeo-Christian view. The Hebrew scripture introduces the God with a mysterious, enigmatic and unpronounceable name, YHWH, who is zealous for changing the structures of violence by challenging them and even by

using lesser forms of violence. There God struggles within him/herself between justice and compassion.

Jesus, for Gandhi, was a true *satyagrahin*, 'a man who was completely innocent, offered himself as a sacrifice for the good of others, including his enemies, and became the ransom of the world. It was a perfect act' (34) 'Jesus was the most active resister known perhaps to history. This was non-violence par excellence' (40). But he did not grasp him as Son of Man as the true representative of the victim community having authority to forgive on their behalf and giving them freedom to forgive or not forgive. He stopped with the ideal of turning the other cheek and did not notice his dramatic action in cleansing the temple, condemning the oppressive religious and political authorities with strong words such as 'woe unto you' and asking the police who struck him at trial, 'if I was wrong to speak what I did, produce the evidence to prove it; if I was right, why strike me?' In his earlier work in South Africa, Gandhi would have acted in such ways. His ideal of non-violence was something he realised in due course. Would the teaching of Jesus have developed similarly if he was given a chance to live longer? What the early Christians perceived was that even after his resurrection Jesus continued to suffer in solidarity with the victims of society and was made the rallying centre as a vulnerable lamb yet having true authority in the context of the tyranny of imperial Rome.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Gandhi's ideal of non-violence will be extolled as long as history continues. Some of his observations are true and right. For instance, 'Unless big nations shed their desire of exploitation and the spirit of violence, of which war is the natural expression and the atom bomb the inevitable consequence, there is no hope for peace in the world' (34). Probably writing in the context of World War II, he said that 'The people of Europe are sure to perish if they continue to be violent' (34). Today many thinking people will join Gandhi asserting with him:

If they can shed the fear of destruction, if they disarm themselves, they will automatically help the rest to regain their sanity. But then these great powers will have to give up their imperialistic ambitions and their exploitation of the so-called uncivilized or semi-civilized nations of the earth and revise their mode of life. It means a complete revolution (52).

But in the process of such a revolution, the place of violence or the application of the ideal of non-violence needs to be considered earnestly. We have shown in this essay, not only problems and contradictions in connecting different views and their application to any response to structural violence in India and around the world today, but also the dilemmas and tensions found in realising the 'ideal' of non-violence. Perhaps the nuances of its realisation can be better understood only in particular situations. For instance, a mother using force to redeem her baby from a baby-snatcher is different from a state accumulating power to dominate and destroy, as Gandhi would have well understood.

As has been shown, Gandhi's obsession with Hindu dharma without discrimination between a myriad of traditions, beliefs and practices, and his interpretation of the Gita without applying any reasoning, have rendered his ideal of non-violence ineffective. Gandhi took the four passing references to non-violence as an ideal virtue and as the essence of the Gita and Hinduism, whereas for any average reader the central message of the text is 'fight and kill for the sake of safeguarding the everlasting dharma'. Radical social critics like Kosambi have demonstrated from the Gita that it advocates murder with impunity. B.G. Tilak and his followers on the other hand followed this central message by fighting any interference with or confusion within the given dharma, that is essentially the brahmanic and caste-oriented dharma. Godse, the assassin of Gandhi came from this fold.

If Merton's selection of Gandhi's writings on non-violence, and his additional comments, were made with full awareness of the Indian

situation, it would appear much more authentic. Praising Gandhi's impact as an enlightened awakening of a whole nation or spiritual consciousness needs to be related to events like the death of more than a million people at the time of partition and exchange between Pakistan and India. Without such recognition, Western projections of Gandhi have only limited appeal for the continued struggle of millions of Indians for their liberation. Of course, Thomas Merton is not the only westerner who has written similarly about Gandhi.

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Peacemakers in Action:
Profiles of Religion in Conflict Resolution

By the TANENBAUM CENTER for Interreligious Understanding

Edited by Dr. David Little

Forword by Ambassador Richard C. Holbrooke

This book shares the stories of 16 religious peacemakers who have put their lives on the line in conflicts around the world. For each of them, religious texts and traditions have served as a practical resource in resolving conflict. They are powerful—but underutilized—actors for resolving some of the world's most horrifying conflicts. As such, this book contains timely information for diplomats, government officials, and conflict resolution practitioners, as well as today's students of religion and international affairs—our future peacemakers. And in a world where religion-based conflicts affect us all, Peacemakers in Action provides critical lessons and much-needed hope.

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Buddhist Attitudes to Other Religions

Seventh Conference of the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies, Salzburg, 8-11 June 2007.

John D'Arcy May

Is it a problem for Buddhists that what is generally regarded as religion can be profoundly different from tradition to tradition? Is it appropriate or even desirable to speak of a Buddhist "theology of religions"? Does Buddhism have its own ways, however subtle, of affirming its superiority over all else that claims the name "religion"? The European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies set out to find answers to these questions at its seventh conference, held at the splendid Catholic conference centre of St Virgil on the outskirts of Salzburg in Austria.

Given the demographic realities in Europe, the Network has inevitably tended to be a group of Christians discussing Buddhism, as far as possible with the participation of Buddhist guests but without really providing a platform for a thoroughgoing Buddhist discussion of religious plurality, such that Buddhism, not Christianity, provides the lens through which to view the religious scene. This time, more Buddhists than ever before, including significant scholars from America and Asia as well as Europe, participated in the conference. We were thus treated to a discussion of Buddhist attitudes to the religions which broke new ground and presented a vivid picture of Buddhism's own internal diversity as its various Asian incarnations are brought into physical proximity and public confrontation in the plural societies of both Asia and the West.

In his introductory address the President of the Network, Prof. John May, paid tribute to the University of Salzburg's newly established Centre for Intercultural Theology and the Study of Religions, whose Director, Prof. Gregor Maria Hoff, welcomed participants on behalf of the university, while Dr Ulrich Winkler contributed substantially to the organisation of the conference. Dr Kristin Kiblinger (Winthrop University), author of the first systematic treatment of Buddhist "inclusivism", opened the conference proper by distinguishing between "open" and "closed" forms of inclusivism. She suggested a parallel with George Lindbeck's "experiential-expressive" paradigm of religious doctrine in order to make clear that Buddhists, like Christians, have ways of privileging their own positions, though these generally remain unacknowledged. "One vehicle" (*ekayāna*) theories of Buddhism have something in common with "common core" theories of Christian pluralism in that they presuppose a "single end" inclusivism. Whether the "positionless position" derived from Buddhist "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*) is a better guarantee of genuine pluralism than the Christian notion of "self-emptying" (*kenōsis*), as suggested by Masao Abe, remains an open question. The Buddhist doctrine of "two truths", one expressed in the "higher" language (*paramārtha-satya*) accessible only to Buddhist practitioners and the other in the "lower" language (*saṃvṛti-satya*) of discourse with others, does not hold out much promise of true mutual respect between traditions.

Prof. John Makransky (Boston College), an ordained Lama and meditation teacher as well as a renowned scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, took up the challenge of developing a Buddhist "theology" which avoids the claim to superiority. What matters to the Buddhist practitioner is to cut through all subconscious clinging, even to approved teachings and spiritual results. "Ultimate truth" can be known, directly but non-conceptually, yielding a "non-conceptual compassion" comparable with what Christians call "totally undivided oneness with

God". Lacking historical consciousness, however, teachers have tended to project their understanding of skilful means back on to Śākyamuni Buddha, each school assuming that other schools are merely preparations for itself. The same pattern is evident in the integration into Buddhism of indigenous religions such as Shintō, which enriched Buddhism but also assimilated it to themselves. Prompted by his contacts with Christian colleagues to venture beyond practice into Buddhist self-reflection, Makransky is now prepared to see in conceptions such as the *Dharmakāya* ("Dharma body" of the Buddha or ultimate reality) an equivalent of what Christians understand by God. The Body of Christ, with its implications for ecclesiology, could open up a further avenue for comparison.

Existing under the conditions of late or post-modernity, Buddhism is forced to come to terms with pluralism and ecumenism. Prof. Kenneth Tanaka (Musashino University, Tokyo), an ordained Jōdo Shinshū priest, sees himself as incapable of saying to a non-Buddhist, "You're not saved", because the practice of *prajñā* and *karuṇā* (wisdom and compassion) is not restricted to Buddhists. Even within traditions, however, spiritual attainment is not equivalent, nor are all religions equally valid. "Prophets can't be pluralists", but like Shinran they can be mindful that all religious language is relative and we are saved by "other power" (*tariki*) as well as by our "own power" (*jiriki*). Prof. Peter Harvey (University of Sunderland, UK), a practicing Theravāda Buddhist, gave a detailed account of the objections of what eventually came to be called the Theravāda to the Mahāyāna, notwithstanding the more recent co-operation of both in the ordination of *bhikkhunī* (nuns) and the renowned Thai monk Buddhadāsa's engagement with the Dalai Lama, who has always tried to transcend sectarianism. Northern Buddhism was mediated by China, where each school classified the parent Indian systems in such a way as to demonstrate its own superiority. All should remember that they take refuge, not in the various *yānas*, but in the Buddha.

There followed a day of astonishing discoveries as Buddhism's relations with some of the other major religions were explored. Prof. Perry Schmidt-Leukel (University of Glasgow) reviewed the ways in which Buddhism has lent itself to violent conflict and polemics, from the "Buddhist-Tamil wars" of Sri Lanka to Ambedkar's opposition to Hinduism; from the anti-Vedic polemics of the early Buddhists to Buddhism's virtual excommunication by Hinduism. By a sort of "reciprocal inclusivism", Hindu deities and practices were integrated into both Theravāda and Mahāyāna, while Hindus interpreted the Buddha as an *avatāra* ("descent" or incarnation) of Viṣṇu, sent to deceive the unwary. Such polemics rarely led to outright persecution, however, and in modern times the Buddhist Dharmapala and the Hindu Vivekananda found more benign ways of interpreting the "other" tradition. Today, both religions need to draw closer together as they come to terms with their powerful rivals, Islam and Christianity.

Dr Alexander Berzin (Berlin), an internationally known lecturer on and translator of Tibetan Buddhism, unfolded the little-known story of 1,300 years of Buddhist relations with Islam. Whereas Muslims generally tried to interpret Buddhism in Muslim terms, Buddhists showed no interest in Islam whatever unless forced to do so by political expediency. Better mutual understanding is now becoming urgent in such contexts as southern Thailand and Indonesia, where a "Buddhist-Muslim ethic for Southeast Asia" is needed, and the Dalai Lama has shown an interest in Sufism. Treating the better known area of Buddhist-Christian relations, Prof. Andreas Grünschloss (University of Göttingen) reminded us how exclusivist some of the pioneers of Western Buddhism, such as Grimm and Dahlke, had been, a tendency that continues in their modern successors such as Mumonkai. Such hybrids as "Christian Zen" are as unacceptable to these Buddhists as the Buddhist interpretations of Christianity by Thich

Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama or Ken Leong are to many Christians. When converts to Buddhism such as Ayya Khema re-read the Sermon on the Mount or I Corinthians 13 with Buddhist eyes, the texts appear spiritualised and de-contextualised.

An especially fascinating presentation was that of Prof. Nathan Katz (Florida International University) on Buddhist relations with Judaism. There are ancient linguistic traces of links between India and Israel, and in modern times mutual attitudes have been ambivalent: Martin Buber relished the East, whereas Franz Rosenzweig resisted it, and Gerschom Scholem admonished his fellow-Jew, the future Ayya Khema, that "Jewish mysticism is not for women", whereupon she found her way to Buddhism while remaining Jewish – "What else?" In Asia, where there have been substantial Jewish communities, Jews were used by Rama VI of Thailand to make coded references to the Chinese as a "parasitic commercial class", while Christian missionaries saw the "bloodsucking" Brahmins as they had been taught to see Jews. Katz's account a dialogue between representative Jewish scholars and Tibetan Buddhists in Dharamsala showed how difficult mutual understanding can be, yet when Ven. Geshe Lobsang Tenzin was asked how Jews could best help the Tibetans he replied: "Just be who you are, just be Jews … The fact that you are still here, the fact that you still worship in your way – this means more to us than anything you could possibly do". "Just like that", Katz concluded, "Geshe-la revealed our own wisdom to us".

Prof. Paul Knitter (Union Theological Seminary, New York) was given the daunting task of outlining a comparison between Buddhist and Christian attitudes. He began by asking whether the diversity of religions is seen as a problem or a blessing in the two traditions. For the popes, religious pluralism is the case *de facto* but not *de jure*, while Buddhist thinkers such as Rita Gross are more likely to ask, "What's the problem?" Whereas theologians have an urge to seek unity, for Buddhists diversity is normal, even ontological. Do the religions have anything in common? (not an expression Buddhists would use). "Identist pluralists" answer Yes, "deep pluralists" say No. Buddhists negate incommensurable differences among religions, believing that we are not imprisoned in the particularity of language; Christians differ according to the ways they understand the Trinitarian nature of God. Contradictory answers are also given to the question of superiority. Each of these answers has to be constructed, not excavated from the traditions, because pluralism is a specifically modern idea. Buddhist theologians, however, have the resources to move beyond the exclusivism and inclusivism that have marked Buddhist history. Although the Dharmakāya is inexpressible, statements of universal truth can be made, a stance that invites dialogue. This need not mean relativism; there is good and bad religion, and each tradition has criteria for identifying its ethical fruits. Despite stark differences, Buddhists and Christians have much to learn from one another. "Buddhists remind Christians what they already attest but all too often forget: that the God revealed by Jesus as 'greater than I' (mysterious) and 'still to come' (eschatological) cannot therefore be limited to Jesus. Christians challenge Buddhists to take history and historical particularities more seriously. … Every historical form may be utterly *empty*. But Emptiness *is* each Form, in all its historical particularity".

In a moving response to this paper, David Brazier, the head of the Pure Land movement in Britain, began: "Amida wants to save all, speaks to all in their language; yet I don't know his name!" None of us knows what we would do given certain circumstances, nor what real faith is: "What if it's *not* so?" We are always trying to appropriate the other, to recruit Buddhism and Christianity for "eco-humanism". Dr Elizabeth Harris (Liverpool Hope University), who has studied the Theravāda extensively in Sri Lanka, said that we can only use our own tools to explore each other's traditions – Christians, for example, could make more use of the ministry of Jesus as portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels – but we will never really

enter into the other's viewpoint unless we let go of our conditioning. If we do so, we can draw deeply from others' wells, as she has been privileged to do.

In the mid-twentieth century Christianity went through a process of "demythologising"; one preliminary outcome of this conference is that there is scope for deconstructing familiar myths about Buddhism's tolerance of and openness to its "others". As David Brazier put it, "our dialogue must be grounded in our failures". The conference offered a growing number of younger scholars the opportunity to present their research projects, which bodes well for the future of Buddhist-Christian studies in Europe. The next conference of the Network will be in the Benedictine Archabbey of St Ottilien, near Munich, 12-15 June 2009, tentatively on the topic "Sources of Authority and Truth in Buddhism and Christianity". At this conference it is hoped that ties with our American counterpart, the Society of Buddhist-Christian Studies, will be further strengthened as we plan for a joint European-American conference and closer trans-Atlantic ties in the future. In the meantime, a whole new field of Christian *and* Buddhist "theology of religions" has been opened up.

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Converging Ways?

Conversion and Belonging in Buddhism and Christianity.

John D'Arcy May

There is currently much discussion of both religious conversion and multiple religious belonging, but there has been little examination of their relationship. This book presents a variety of approaches to the problem, from autobiographical accounts of intense personal experience in monastic settings and research into historical controversies and empirical data to a comprehensive theory of multiple belonging by Michael von Brück.

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An Apologia for the Kyoto Cosmos Club

Morris J. Augustine, S.T.D., Ph.D.

Introduction

During the past century historians, anthropologists, paleontologists and philosophers have uncovered a bountiful treasure-trove of evidence that religions and spiritualities all over our world and in every age are closely related to each other. Since the nineteen-fifties people like Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell, followed by a whole host of specialists in many fields, have convinced most of the scientific and scholarly world that the human phenomenon of religion in its broadest outlines, and even in the sum total of its concrete forms, can and should be seen as a single whole. More recently, outstanding theologians, buddhologists, believing Islamic, Jewish and Hindu teachers have come to agree with this viewpoint, in ever increasing numbers.

A little more than two years ago a group of religiously committed scholars, teachers and artists, each agreeing with this view of religion in his/her own way, decided to try to counteract—in our Kyoto, Japan area and over the internet at least—the awful hatred and violence evinced by many religious believers. We founded an organization of friends who are open to all religious traditions. We simply "break bread together," in a spirit of mutual respect for each other's spiritual ways. We strongly feel that there are very solid religious and social scientific reasons for doing this. We decided to call ourselves "The Kyoto Cosmos Club" because we are a group of intellectually, artistically and spiritually oriented people who feel that our magnificent cosmos, evolving and expanding now for more than thirteen billion years, is the proper perspective from which to look at ourselves. It appears to us that religion in its many forms evolved along with the human species itself: that "God," "the gods," or whatever name is given to the Transcendent Dimension, has revealed Him/Her/It/them-self(s) to all us human beings. In the words of so many different sacred scriptures, the heavens or cosmos and the earth show forth the glory and love of this Transcendent. In a real way this makes us one. Though our members hail from all five continents and from most of the great, world-encircling religious traditions, we are essentially brothers and sisters. The Kyoto Cosmos Club is a small group of mature, educated people, with very big ideas and ideals.

We believe that the mysterious Source-Ground from which all religions have emerged has fired the inspiration of very different charismatic leaders in hundreds of different societies in every age. Each was deeply convinced that her or his understanding the world offered the best answer to what the cosmos and life, in its human and non-human forms, ultimately really is. These charismatic leaders each succeeded in convincing their listeners that her or his way of understanding the world best explained why their world was filled with both beauty, meaning and goodness, as well as with evil, suffering and death. Such religious leaders offered followers a "world story" carefully tailored to fit that particular society's unique history, language, customs ethos, gifts and problems.

Religious expression in the form of song, dance, and other rituals aroused emotions which confirmed the sense of harmony which their prophet's teachings about the nature of the world and its corresponding moral code had aroused. They felt and believed that they had found the Ultimate Truth on which their world rested. Thus, a particular leader might have proclaimed that the very early worldview that the great Mother Goddess gave birth to and continues to nourish and guide the cosmos

and all of her—such a charismatic leader was more than likely a women—many kinds of living children. Such a powerful message most likely came to seize hold of the hearts and minds of neighboring tribes, and spread—perhaps around the world. In a similar manner, probably, the stories told in the Vedas, or those told by Shakyamuni, Abraham, Jesus and Mohammed spread with relative speed from one territory or continent to another—such was the depth of their resonance in the human heart.

Unfortunately, however, the politico-military leaders—from Amazon queens to male chieftains—were more than likely reluctant to share their power with such new charismatic religious leaders. In fact, they themselves were often considered divine or semi-divine, so they quickly grew jealous of the powerful competition. But, if the new prophet's message captured enough hearts in the tribe or nation, this tribal leader might choose to co-opt her new rival's religious influence by linking her governmental leadership with the new religious leader. In fact this may well have been the case when the Roman Emperor Constantine decided to become a Christian and begin to build the great Christian Churches that still grace the ancient Roman capital.

In such cases both religious and civil leaders came to hold even more power between them. Unfortunately, both kinds of leaders fiercely relished their power; they collaborated with one another to hold tightly to the total power over both civil government and the religious faith and moral code of the whole society. Likewise, the rich people—often the close henchmen to the kings and priests—also loved the power that wealth brings and were not willing to share their vast holdings. So, the rich men and women managed to pull off the same type of coup: allying themselves with both religious leaders and kings and thereby were able to even increase their wealth.

But the tribe on the other side of the mountain range may have had a different skin color, a different language, and/or different ways of seeing and doing all of the things that humans do: marrying, rearing children and dying. In fact—probably even before the human animal had emerged as such—already "birds of a feather" had "flocked together," and so had fish and animals. So, by the time this new human animal came to be able to look in intelligent awe and wonder at its world and find symbolic religious stories to explain it all, the Gordian knot of binding "church" to "state" leashed religious and tribal leaders together. They proclaimed, "Our people and our gods must be special, so never should our *really real* people and goddesses be subject to miscegenation and dilution with other, "lesser people and divinities". But times changed and slowly the world grew very small.

Two centuries ago, due to complex political, religious and technical developments on our much smaller planet, church and state *did* – ever so slowly—come to be seen, legally and/or constitutionally, as separate entities, each with rights of their own. At the present time this separation remains only imperfectly true—and only in a relatively few countries. Separated in many countries of the world. Today, nevertheless, in more and more countries, people are legally forbidden to practice discrimination on the basis of race, creed, color, gender—and, finally, also on the basis of sexual orientation. The process seems to be only in the beginning stages of genuine realization.

Part of this progress was unquestionably due to scientific proof that human beings of whatever race or color are near enough to being equal in both body and spirit or intelligence that any discrimination is unethical. An important part of this progress was also due to the ease with which people of different races, nationalities and religions travel and mingle with one another. Today, millions of people from every area of the globe have been able to see and feel for themselves both how marvelously different and how equally human all peoples, nations, and religions—and unbelievers as well—really are. A little more than a half century ago the United Nations was founded on these principles of universal human equality and rights.

Alas, however, even though such laws are on the books in many countries, they cannot immediately uproot what is in the minds and hearts of people. And that old Gordian knot binding "church" and "state" has not really been severed, since some nations still retain subtle, or not-so-subtle, privileges for the predominant sect. This is true in India for Hinduism, in Israel for Jews, in many western countries for Christianity, and perhaps especially, in some countries with overwhelmingly Islamic populations for Islam. Why? The answer to this question carries us into the heart of the Kyoto Cosmos Club's *raison d'etre*.

Academic, Scientific and Religious Reasons

There is little if any question among the majority of scholars that religions *do* evolve. Before the age of discovery, of travel, of mass communication and mass education, Jews, Christians, followers of Islam, as well as most followers of Buddhism and Hinduism, were convinced that their teaching and their sacred books *alone* held the real, the ultimate, religious truth. Only in the nineteenth century did the pioneers of textual criticism begin to see more and more clearly that even inside the sacred Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist texts—and even subtly within the holy Koran that was written by the hand of a single person in a single lifetime—doctrinal and moral stances change and evolve. Sometimes this change becomes very clear; if one moves from the Hindu Vedas through the Upanishads and into modern Hinduism the change is unmistakable. Only the most determined fundamentalist can fail to see the evolution here. In the New Testament, there is clear evidence that the early writers thought that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent—sometimes it is expected within the lifetime of the sacred writer. Again, only those who cannot question the literal inerrancy of the sacred texts can find ways to believe that this is—was—literally true.

But the evolution that took place in the sacred canonical texts pales in comparison with the slow changes in the moral and doctrinal stance of the great religious traditions. This is because, in general terms at least, the original Story that gave rise to a new religion was told within the context of the *natural* knowledge and worldview in place at the time of the telling. When Shakyamuni Buddha declared the world-shattering fact that no such thing as an eternal "ego" existed, even though individuals might go through countless rebirths, he had no reason to change what everyone considered to be the shape of the actual, "natural" cosmos—with its many "worlds" and its countless Buddhas, bodhisattvas, demons and devas. Today the Buddhist who believes in the literal truth of this scriptural cosmos is rare indeed—at least from the perspective of this scholar and professor after spending thirty-four of his seventy-three years living in Japan. When the New Testament was written, no sacred writer taught that slavery was intrinsically immoral. Today, no Christian to my knowledge—and one can safely add in the great majority of contemporary believing scholars of Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism—doubts that slavery is evil.

Most educated scholarly believers accept their own creation myths as just that: valuable symbolic stories containing much precious truth and beauty—but not literally true. Of course this rule is proved by many notable exceptions, even among scholars.

Charles Darwin, Einstein, Heisenberg and their fellow scientists showed us unquestionable proof that our cosmos, as well as our solar system and the biological life on our planet, are continually evolving. Once these facts are digested it is not so hard to see that religion and spirituality also evolve. The next big question that we of the Kyoto Cosmos Club wrestle with is: How? With the well-known American sociologist of religion, Robert N. Bellah—and with his caveats—we humbly believe that religion is a very important kind of *sui generis* truth. Bellah wrote that,

If we define religion as that symbol system that serves to evoke what Herbert Richardson calls the "felt whole," that is, the totality that includes subject and object and provides the context in which life and action finally have meaning, then

I am prepared to claim that, as Durkheim said of society, religion is a reality sui generis [sic]. To put it bluntly, religion is true. This is not to say that every religious symbol is equally valid any more than every scientific theory is equally valid. But it does mean that since religious symbolization and the religious experiences are inherent in the structure of human existence, all reductionism must be abandoned.[i]

We feel in our gut and hold in our heads and hearts both our religious faith and the marvelous natural whole that is our cosmos. We know the cosmos naturally and scientifically, but we also are committed to faith in our cosmos' invisible and transcendent "Ground" as described by the Protestant theologian and philosopher, Paul Tillich. So once again today, we possess a very important kind of truth in which our faith and our natural knowledge of cosmos basically coincide. We know all too well that some scientists—and non-scientists as well, feel with Richard Dawkins and his many fellow non-believers, that this faith in the transcendent dimension of our cosmos is a "delusion." But we reject this judgment as itself a form of anti-religious faith. Along with those who dismissed Freud's earlier prediction of the death of the religious "illusion," we counter that religion is the outermost sphere of a whole context of many different kinds of truth: religion may be symbolic truth—none of us can know the Ground of being with our merely human mind—but it remains for believers the most precious truth of all, the truth that grounds all other truths in hope and love.

Yes, empirically grounded, falsifiable truth is also a precious truth-variety. So are the political, the financial, philosophical, artistic and literary varieties of truth. Religious truth embraces "the felt whole," in which all other kinds of truth are integral parts. Religious faith humbly holds that these other many precious truths are not isolated, unrelated, modules; they form a whole that is filled with the beauty and love of a Transcendent Dimension, whether that dimension be teleological or a divine dimension of the process.

So what is religion? How can we justify this argument: Every religious system that has been adopted by a large part of some society, and has served to ground the values, hopes and limit the dark angst of absurdity for not just decades but centuries and millennia is really "true"? We could go with a branch of the linguistic and phenomenological philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, or Emmanuel Levinas to argue our point, but I personally—and some, but by no means all of my fellow Kyoto Cosmos members—prefer a different route. Our route is that of social scientists like Bellah (sociologist) and Clifford Geertz (anthropologist). They, and many in the school that has formed around them, begin with Geertz's definition of religion. Religious truth is a kind of truth based on a system of symbolic stories that illuminate and ground the system of ethics and values—a system that has already been proved by test of long experience in that society. The Story grounds the ethical values. This kind of religious truth does *not* have to be empirically grounded; but it is symbolically grounded, and this is a very real kind of ground. On our web-site, www.kyotocosmos.org/, we cite Geertz's definition as follows:

Religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long lasting moods and motivations in men [and women] by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.[ii]

On the surface, this definition seems almost cynical in its scrupulously empirical neutrality as to whether or not religion is simply a delusion or is in fact an extremely important truth that forms a part of literally every society. But that's what anthropologists are expected to do. But Geertz unpacks his definition with his long and detailed analysis of things like his own field-work in the religion of Bali. During the frightening celebrations of the evil Balinese goddess, anyone who would dare to ask a native Balinese participant whether or not the goddess is really real would be considered somewhat mad. Of course she is real and true!

And so it goes for the Christian, Jew or Muslim, especially in the midst of really serious rites of worship. Modern, intellectually sophisticated, believers might know that the truths of faith are of a symbolic variety—but they are, for these believers too, *really true*!

Which brings us to our last major point. The well-known American philosopher of science, Thomas S. Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*[iii] gave a name to this at-first-glance topsy-turvy new world of truth. He showed how even empirically verified scientific truth is not simply "true"; all truth changes as newly discovered facts slowly alter our perception of the very essence of things. Each new era of human understanding brings a "new paradigm of truth."[iv] The ancient Greek notions of truth and how humans know reality, formed first by people like Plato and then brought to a new sophistication by Aristotle, slowly came to be proven inaccurate by Newton's new laws of physics. And truth itself underwent a fundamental change! But then—shocking and absurd though it may appear to be at first glance—the "truths" that Newton established were themselves overturned by Einstein's and Heisenberg's insights into the relativity of time and space, and the degree to which the empirical measuring itself can alter the thing measured.

All of a sudden we became aware that the ancient wisdom that "man is the measure of all things," was itself only a limited truth. Kuhn taught us that one worldview: the truth of one age gets slowly worn away by contrary insights—until a new paradigm of reality comes into focus. And immediately that new paradigm begins to be chipped away by even newer insights and empirically proven facts. Now we know that the quantum world of sub-atomic physics does not obey Einstein's brilliant insights into the truths of the macro-world, those available to our five senses. And now this contradiction is itself being hammered by "super-string theory," and so it continues in our world of today.

Thomas Kuhn's brilliant insight is *not* a reason for cynical relativism. Neither is the Kyoto Cosmos Club's belief that many religions can be true at the same time. More than one contradictory symbolic truth can be *really* true at the same time—poetic and literary symbols show us the same kind of wonderful, but simultaneously incompatible, truth. Time can pass "like a snail" and "in a flash." Both can simultaneously be true, albeit from two different people's perspectives. Kuhn's new insight just refines the age-old truth that we must make allowance for new discoveries—including our relatively new insight that the human brain is not necessarily the ultimate criterion for truth. Even empirical, hard-nosed scientific truth—the shibboleth of the Enlightenment and the scientific world—helped give birth to revolutions in which its own most basic truths were overturned or simply proven to be false. Is it any wonder that educated, thinking believers today might come to respect, and even love, the different religious truths of sisters and brothers of another culture? They all arose out of the same human body, as it perceived the same cosmos with the same five senses and the same human brain.

Theologians and historians of religion were not slow to see that Kuhn's insight into the paradigms of truth applied to religion too, in a very special way. Leading theologians in both the Catholic and the Protestant traditions were not long in picking up Kuhn's notion of new paradigms. John Hicks and Shubert Ogden in the Protestant tradition, and Hans Kung and Paul Knitter in the Catholic, seized hold of this new "paradigm" notion of truth. And they are but a few of many religious thinkers in various world religious traditions who have followed suit, each in their own ways. Protestant thinkers built on the earlier ground-breaking works of Paul Tillich and Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr, and Catholics on the thought of Teilhard de Chardin and Karl Rahner. Today, works by Roger Haight[v], by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry[vi], John Hick[vii], Shubert Ogden,[viii] William Cantwell Smith and others deal with Kuhn's insights indirectly, while Hans Kung and David Tracy and others—both Christians and other religions' believers—apply them directly to the whole phenomenon of religion in human history[ix]

Not all of the members of the Kyoto Cosmos Club—whether Buddhist, Christian or others—would be ready to subscribe to this application of Kuhn's "paradigm-shifts" in truth to their own religion. However, it seems to me to be apt. If one looks carefully at Geertz's definition of religion given above, and follows through in looking at Jesus, Shakyamuni Buddha, the Jewish authors of the Pentateuch's creation story, and other great religious leaders' creation stories, one can perhaps see how the symbolic teachings of each can retain their truth. They remain deeply serious and important truths for our world.

Nevertheless, I totally condemn the idea that "one religion is as good as the other." Religion in every age and society is only as credible as the accompanying ethical commitments are credible. As explained above, each culture and society has an ethical tradition that has been tried and proven by generations of experiences. This applies also to the ethics of our budding global consciousness of our global world. Hans Kung and others have explored the parameters of a "Global Ethic"[x] This notion has caught the attention of many religions and religious traditions, and even of the United Nations. Whereas not everyone has gone this far to combine the insights of both the ancient religious traditions and modern secular thinkers as well, it certainly highlights the common ethical teachings at the heart of the many global religious traditions.

This global ethic includes the above insight that all human beings are equal in dignity. They all have a natural right to be free, including the freedom to believe or disbelieve, and to worship or not worship, as their conscience directs. No religion or sect that denies this right can really measure up to this global ethic that is now being born, or is already fully developed in many cases. Hence, any such religion or sect that denies this natural universal human right—from the point of view of the Kyoto Cosmos Club at least—is not "as good as" those who accept it. So one religion is definitely not "as good as the other."

Looked at in a historical perspective, each religious symbol system of beliefs, practices, rites, and moral convictions arose independently of others which arose either in other times, or at least in other places, climates and cultural circumstances. Each religion or spiritual Way is true in the time and place in which it awakens faith and serious commitment in the hearts of many believers. Bellah, in declaring that religion itself was a valid symbolic form of truth, should be understood in this new framework. But we are ahead of ourselves. As a conclusion, let us now go back and trace Bellah's argument carefully to see what he is and is not saying.

Conclusions

Robert Bellah was brought back to his early Protestant Christian faith primarily by Paul Tillich's ideas, which took into account the scientific and philosophic thought of the twentieth century as they unfolded during his lifetime. This brought him out of his early anti-religious dedication to the Marxist-Communist worldview. Like Richard Dawkins' faith in the "God Delusion,"[xi] this Marxist worldview inspires and continues to inspire a type of faith in the un-provable hypothesis that God does not exist; it combines this worldview with a set of noble moral values and commitments. Like Dawkins, Marxists and a host of other thinkers today, Bellah was in his early adulthood a believer in this anti-God brand of religious faith. With the help of Tillich's and other believing thinkers, he returned to his earlier Protestant faith. It was in this context that he came to apply his friend Clifford Geertz's ideas directly to his own and to others' religious faith.

European thinkers—such as those in the tradition of the great Frankfurt School social theorist, Jurgen Habermas[xii] who argued against the soundness of religious modes of thought back in the 1970s—might be far less sanguine about this kind of daring break-through from the Enlightenment tradition's rejection of religious faith. Both Bellah and I respect Habermas' honest probing of the knotty problems that preoccupy the Kyoto Cosmos Club. Five years of living, studying,

and teaching in Europe has taught me how different the European experience is from that of either the Americas or the Far East. Like so many of the intellectuals in Europe during the past decades, Bellah too has tasted the Marxist waters and existential absurdism of the past century. Bellah himself had enough admiration of Habermas' own social scientific and philosophic thought to consider inviting him to join the sociology faculty at the University of California at Berkeley. Although we in the Kyoto Cosmos Club dare to once again unite the rational and scientific power of our world and ancient religious traditions, this does not mean that we deny that the ancient prophets and charismatic leaders who wrote or appear in religious texts and scriptures intended their revelations to be taken literally. Most of us simply believe that we now live in a world where the paradigms of truth—both scientific and religious—do change. And from within our own paradigm of religious truth we rejoice to know that most of these great religious heralds in fact agree on some extremely important moral and religious truths. The great world-encircling religious traditions generally agree that tolerance of the beliefs of others, mercy toward all who suffer, and love-compassion for all living beings are central truths. The bottom line, then, is that the human mind and heart needs both natural knowledge and a faith in a transcendent Ground of being in order to effectively hope and love.

[i] 1. Cf. Robert N. Bellah, in, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World*, "Between Religion and the Social Sciences," 252-253, (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).
[ii] For Geertz's best presentations of his ideas on religion as a symbol system, see, Clifford, Geertz, The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays," *Religion as a Cultural System*," p. 90, (New York:" Basic Books, 1973).
[iii] Thomas S. Kuhm, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed., (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1970.
[iv] *Ibid*., Chapter Five, The Priority of Paradigms, 43-51.
[v] Roger Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, (Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 2002)
[vi] Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story*, (San Francisco, Harper, 1994)
[vii] John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, (Louisville, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995)
[viii] Shubert M. Ogden, Is there Only One True Religion, or Are There Many?, (Dallas, Southern Methodist Press, 1992)
[ix] Cf. For example, Hans Kung and David Tracy, *Paradigm Change in Theology*, (Edinburg, 1989)
[x] For an overview of the Global Ethic, see, Hans Kung, Global Responsibility: In Search of a New Global Ethic, (New York, Continuum, 1996*), The United Nations and the World's Religions: Prospects for a Global Ethic (Proceedings of a Conference held October 7, 1997 at Columbia University)*, eds, Michael Hays and Nancy Hodes (Boston: Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, 1995). See also, Hans Kung, A Global Ethc for Global Politics and Ecomonics, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
[xi] Cf. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (Boston & New York, Houghton Mifflin, 2006)
[xii] Habermas argued his point in a long exchange with Paul Ricour. This debate appears in the 1970 volume of the yearly journal, *Continuum.*

Morris J. Augustine, STD, Ph.D. is President of the Kyoto Cosmos Club. Recently retired Professor of Literature at Kansai University in Osaka, he holds doctorates in Catholic Theology and in History and Phenomenology of Religion with specialization in Buddhism. He spent thirteen years as a Benedictine monk and was ordained to the priesthood in 1960.

A Campaign Declaration

Bangalore Initiative for Religious Dialogue (BIRD)
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Bangalore 560 084, INDIA
Tel. 080 2580 0647

January 1, 2007

To
The Prime Minister of India
The US Commission on International Religious Freedom
The Secretary General, United Nations
The President, European Union

CHRISTIANS AGAINST PROSELYTISM

As Indian Christians, we believe that the best and perhaps the only way we can bear witness to our faith, is by extending our unconditional love to our neighbours and expecting nothing in return as Jesus Christ showed us. As such, we are against aggressive faith marketing by any religious group because such efforts discredit India's tradition of respecting all religious thought and also runs counter to the true spirit in which the Constitution grants people the right to profess, practice and propagate their faith.

We are Christians. Some of us were born into Christianity, others freely chose to embrace it. We also believe that the Great Commission in the Gospel according to Matthew unequivocally calls us to witness Christ in a pluralistic setting without violating the right of the other to preach, practice and profess his/her faith. Witnessing Jesus cannot in any case be done by questionable means, whether by exploiting people's socio-psychological vulnerabilities or by running down other religions.

Furthermore, we believe the Christian injunction to make disciples of all nations in today's context is best honoured by the bearers of the Good News living exemplary Christian lives and showing respect for the nations commitment to pluralism, for the larger public good in a civil society. Conversion of faith, given its life-changing nature, stems from a considered personal experience and is less likely in this day and age to be the stuff of dramatic immediacy.

When India's Supreme Court ruled, in 1977, that a citizens right to "profess, practice and propagate" ones religion does not include the right to convert another it was merely reaffirming both tradition and the Constitution. We believe that every nation should give primacy to maintenance of public order by ensuring safety and security to the life and property of its citizens.

India's all-encompassing culture and secular Constitution allows not only its citizens but also visitors the freedom of religious practice. But, Article 25 of the Constitution which guarantees that right also subjects it to the maintenance of "public order, morality and health" of the citizenry. We therefore call on the Government of India and all secular countries to seek an amendment to Article 18 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights by expanding it through the addition of a second sentence (capitalised): "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. **However, no individual or organisation may seek to convert an individual or a group of individuals, including minors or individuals of limited cognitive abilities, formally or informally, from one religion to another by offering financial or other material incentives; through physical, mental or emotional coercion; or through threats or intimidation of any kind.**"

While we decry the attempts of religious leaders and fundamentalists of all varieties to convert and re-convert, we pledge to work diligently for inter-faith amity in the best traditions of Indian culture. We hereby call on all Indians to join in our efforts to preserve a pluralist India founded on secularism and religious inclusion and governed by a Constitution that guarantees all its citizens all freedoms vital to the functioning of a modern democracy.

Signed by:

1) P.N.BENJAMIN,
2) EMERSON SAMUEL,
3) J. SUHAS,
4) NOEL NORONHA,
5) PRASANNA KUMAR,
6) REV. Dr. M. MANI CHACKO
7) REV. DR. KIRAN SEBASTIAN,
8) REV. DR. ISRAEL SELVANAYAGAM
9) REV. JEEVAN BABU
10) Fr. Dr. ALBERT NAMBIAMPARAMBIL
11) Fr. Dr. MATHEW CHANDRANKUNNEL
12) Fr. Dr. GEORGE KOOVAKKAL
13) BRIAN SOANS
14) Rev. Dr. SIGA ARLES
15) KRIPA JOHN
16) KOSHY MATHEW
17) TINA MATHEW
18) ASHOK MATHEWS PHILIP
19) MIRIAM MATHEWS
20) GODFREY A.A.
21) SIJI MALAYIL
22) CIBY MALAYIL
23) REV. THOMAS NAINAN
24) ABY ABRAHAM
25) Mrs ABY ABRAHAM
26) JACOB ABRAHAM
27) KARTHYANI JACOB
28) M.A. SEBASTIAN
29) PHILIPS K. CHERIAN
30) KOMBAN A. ANTONY
31) C.V.JOSE
32) JOSEPH VANNERY
34) V.K.JOHNNY
35) GEORGIE C. GEORGE
36) NINA C. GEORGE
37) C.J. GEORGE
38) ANNIE C. GEORGE
39) MAY BENJAMIN
40) SNEHA OOMMEN
41) K.T.THOMAS
42) SHANTHAM THOMAS
43) DANIEL THOMAS
44) ANU THOMAS
45) C.T. KOSHY
46) MOLLY VARGHESE
47) ABRAHAM VARGHESE
48) VICTOR ABRAHAM
49) SATYAN PARAKKADAVIL
50) SIMON VARGHESE
51) C. J. YESUDAS
52) DERRICK FULLENFAW
53) Mrs. DERRICK FULLENFAW
54) SUNDER GEORGE
55) SHAJI GEORGE THOMAS
56) VINCENT PANNIKULANGARA
57) PETER ISSAC
58) SUKUMAR GEORGE
59) GRACE GEORGE,
60) K.C. ABRAHAM
61) Fr. ROY PALATTIL
62) KING DASS
63) Prof. ISSAC GEORGE
64) Prof. MARIAM GEORGE 65) JACOB PUNNEN
66) Dr. MARIAM GEORGE
67) Dr. GEORGE JOHN
68) GEORGE THOMAS
69) Prof. ABRAHAM P. SAMUEL
70) MARKOSE PHILIP
71) JOYKUTTY JOSEPH
72) SUSAN JOSEPH
73) Rev. ABRAHAM VARKEY T
74) P.N.SAMUEL
75) KURIEN JOHN
76) ABRAHAM JOHN
77) JOSEPH JOHN
78) P. J. KOSHY
79) Mrs. MARIAMMA KOSHY
80) EBBY JOSEPH KOSHY
81) Mrs. JOSEPH KOSHY
82) SAM J ABRAHAM
83) KURIEN GEORGE
85) Prof. ABY VEEMBUKATTIL
86) RAVI WALTERS
87) BABUKUTTY KURIEN
88) PRAMOD JOHN
89) LINCY JOHN,
90) E.A. ANDREWS
91) Mrs. ERNEST ANDREWS,
92) C.M.JOHN,
93) Mrs. CHINNAMMA JOHN,
94) P.V.OOMMEN,
95) P.O. OOMMEN,
96) K.A. THOMAS,
97) Mrs. K.A. THOMAS,
98) DAVID CASTELLINO,
99) Mrs. MARY DAVID,
100) MARY MATHEW
101) ERNEST ALBERT,
102) Mrs ERNEST ALBERT,
103) BABU MODA

Hofstra accepting nominations for Guru Nanak Interfaith Prize

$50,000 international prize to be awarded in 2008

Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY – Hofstra University is accepting applications for the Guru Nanak Interfaith Prize, a $50,000 award for a living individual or organization who has contributed to the promotion of constructive dialogue between faith communities.

The prize will be awarded biannually beginning in 2008. The winner will be chosen by a distinguished panel of judges composed of religious leaders, academics and individuals known for their commitment to interfaith dialogue. Award recipients will have demonstrated extraordinary leadership, courage and a capacity for inspiring in others a willingness to embrace the vulnerability that is the key to true religious dialogue.

The goal of this international award is to bring greater visibility to the critical role that religious dialogue plays in the pursuit of peace and to provide direct support for the furtherance of such activities. Guru Nanak, founder of Sikhism, taught that we locate our oneness with humanity by exploring the differences that separate us.

The prize was funded by a generous gift from the family of Ishar Singh Bindra and will be awarded by Hofstra in collaboration with the Sardarni Kuljit Kaur Bindra Charitable Foundation.

Serving as the honorary committee for the prize is the Hon. I.K. Gujral, former prime minister of India; Nobel Peace Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu; the Hon. Charles Schumer and the Hon. Norm Coleman, U.S. senators; Rabbi David Rosen of the American Jewish Committee; Dr. Martin Marty of The Martin Marty Center; Mr. Khushwant Singh, historian and journalist; and Mr.Tarlochan Singh, Member of Parliament, India.

Nominators should provide a brief description of themselves (no more than 100 words) and a two-page letter describing the individual or organization being nominated and the activities the nominator believes qualify the nominee for consideration. Nominations may be submitted electronically at www.hofstra.edu/gurunanak , in writing to Dean Bernard J. Firestone, Hofstra College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, 200A Heger Hall, 115 Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY 11549-1115, or by e-mail at GuruNanakPrize@hofstra.edu .

Hofstra University is a dynamic private institution located 25 miles east of New York City where students find their edge to succeed in more than 140 undergraduate and 155 graduate programs in liberal arts and sciences, business, communication, education and allied human services, and honors studies, and a School of Law.

REQUEST FOR TOLERANCE STORIES

News sources are filled with accounts of intolerance and with disturbing images to accompany intolerant acts. Readers and viewers are bombarded with stories filled with hate, misunderstandings, greed, and intolerance—hate crimes, targeted ethnic killings, acts of terrorism, wars, racism, and sexism. Yet among all these acts of intolerance, there are often stories of tolerance, both large and small. But these stories of tolerance do not claim the front page of newspapers, the covers of magazines, or the top news broadcast story. Sometimes they are never reported and are forgotten as time passes. Yet these stories of tolerance are of infinite importance; they help individuals better understand the other, they help individuals gain empathy, and ultimately act according to that empathy.

To combat the persistence of intolerance and its negative consequences, an international not-for-profit human rights organization is collecting stories of tolerance that will be published as a resource book for educators, students, and the general public. This effort is part of the Teaching for Tolerance Project with The Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The Oslo Coalition is an international network of representatives from academia, faith communities, NGOs and international organizations that seek to promote freedom of religion and belief worldwide.

The resource book will feature stories that discuss various aspects and areas of tolerance and intolerance, but the book will place special emphasis on religious tolerance, which is the focus of the Oslo Coalition's work. The Tolerance Stories Project coordinator, Dr. T. Jeremy Gunn, decided to collect stories of tolerance because *"stories are the first and most enduring literary form and they have the power to shape people's understanding of the world and to change their lives."* Thus, stories from millennia ago or centuries ago, or only days ago, can all be easily included, side by side, in one resource book with commentaries and questions to help guide the reader and educator with discussions regarding tolerance. The value of these stories, even those stories from long ago and about people so different from ourselves is that *"we learn about ourselves from learning about others,"* Gunn explained.

The stated main aim of the project is *"[t]o encourage school education that increases understanding and respect between people of different religions or world views and that foster knowledge about and respect for freedom of religion or belief as a human right, and by this contribute to combat discrimination and intolerance based on religion or belief and prevent violations of the human right to freedom of religion or belief."* Creating a resource book of tolerance stories for educators will encourage and enable teachers to include classroom teaching opportunities and discussions that focus on the benefits of understanding and respecting the Other. The goal of the project is not for students to simply put up with or endure the presence of one who is different. Rather, the creation of this resource book is for students, through exposure to stories of tolerance and directed classroom discussion, to cultivate a fair, objective, and sympathetic attitude toward those whose opinions, practices, race, religion, sex, nationality, or other characteristic differs from his her or her own. In effect, the goal of the project is for students to become more understanding of differences and this Tolerance Stories Project can be an invaluable aid in leading students down a path of tolerance.

In a world full of violence and acts of intolerance, it is vitally important to foster tolerance in the world's youth—the future leaders of countries. *"From a human perspective, to have tolerance and respect is to have empathy for others -- to see the world through their eyes,"* Gunn said. *"One of the best ways of learning this empathy is to learn about the world from another's perspective, to*

hear inspiring tales of how people have overcome prejudice, and to visualize the terrible consequences of irrational hatred both on the victim and on the person who bears the prejudice."

The necessity of a book with a collection of tolerance stories has become apparent as researchers have scoured hundreds of books, conducted innumerable searches on the internet and library catalogs and found only a sparse number of thought-provoking stories of tolerance. Too often, only the stories of intolerance are told. But inspiring stories of selfless acts of tolerance exist. They need to be located and added to the tolerance stories already found. And there exist many other stories of tolerance that lie silent within many of us. These stories need to be written and published. This reader of tolerance stories could be a wonderful opportunity to get an unpublished story of tolerance published.

You can help educate the youth of today and create a more tolerant upcoming generation by contributing your stories of tolerance. The stories we are seeking may be suitable for any age level, and they may be drawn from works of great world literature, or a local newspaper, or even written specially for this project. The stories may be true accounts of real events or entirely imaginary. They may be copyrighted or in the public domain. The story can be in English or any other language as long as a translation is available.
We are looking for stories that might, for example:

- reveal the harmful consequences of intolerance
- show how an important experience helps someone overcome a prejudice
- describe the benefits of cooperating with people who at first seem different
- explain how intolerance hurts the person who is prejudiced
- illustrate how intolerance may be based on false assumptions.

We welcome your suggestions and contributions. Please send your recommendations (either the story itself or the citation to a place where we can find it) in any language to:
tolerancestories@gmail.com.

For additional information on this project, please see the formal call for papers at:
http://www.oslocoalition.org/html/project_school_education/CallStories.htm.

For additional information on the Coalition's larger project Teaching for Tolerance and Freedom of Religion or Belief, of which this call for tolerance stories is a part, see:
http://www.oslocoalition.org/html/project_school_education/index.html.

If you know of specific individuals, organizations, or programs that might be interested in helping, please send their name and contact information to: tolerancestories@gmail.com.

.. seeing God in all persons of whatever race or creed..

CHRIST ACROSS THE GANGES

Hindu Responses to Jesus

Sandy Bharat

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UNDERSTANDING FAITH

Understanding Islam

Professor Cafer S. Yaran
Professor of the Philosophy of Religion
Faculty of Theology, University of Istanbul

Islam can be one of the most misunderstood religions. For some people it is a religion of war, whilst for the others it is a religion of peace; as the literal translation of Islam into English indicates. So there is a great need for a sympathetic understanding of Islam. The author introduces Islam in its many dimensions covering the main historical, theological, practical, ethical, spiritual, social, and global themes.

The bed-rock of Islam is the unity of God based on Qur'anic revelation. On this foundation a wide diversity of approaches and understandings have been built, ranging from the theological, philosophical, and Sufistic to the fundamentalist, traditionalist, modernist and post-modernist of recent times. In this book, however, Islam is presented from a mainstream and moderate perspective.

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