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**New Neighbours, New Opportunities
The challenges of Multiculturalism and Social Responsibility**

Workshop on Jewish-Christian Dialogue in Non-Western Countries

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Religion has had resurgence in many parts of the world, and entered the public domain and policy discussions, both nationally and internationally. There is clearly a change of attitude in the secular state and in public discourse with respect to the enduring impulses of religion and religious communities. Some have called this the post-secular world. If Max Weber has associated the disenchantment of the world with the rise of capitalism and modernity, today scholars in religion are busy exploring the reasons for the “permanence” of the theologico-political.

Globalization and the mass media have spawned a secular and consumerist culture on the one hand, and stimulated an interest in the search for cultural and religious identity on the other. Religious fundamentalism of all kinds—including Christian, Islamic, Jewish, and Hindu—can be seen in different parts of the world. Religious and ethnic conflicts have torn communities apart in some of the poorest societies in the Global South.

Much of the debate on the significance and value of religion has been occasioned by the theory of “the clash of civilizations” proposed by the late Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington. Many critics have criticized Huntington’s over-simplistic characterization of civilizations and his rigid and fixed conception of religious and cultural boundaries. His work stimulates us to think of ways that we can live together across religious differences and the cultural divide to create a better world for the future.

Huntington's former colleague at Harvard, Chinese philosopher Tu Wei-ming states, "Our awareness of the danger of civilizational conflicts, rooted in ethnicity, language, land, and religion, makes the necessity of dialogue particularly appealing. An alternative model of sustainable development, with an emphasis on the ethical and spiritual dimensions of human flourishing, must be sought."

I will begin by tracing the different trajectories of interfaith dialogue in the West and in Asia for our further conversation.

Interfaith Dialogue—Different Trajectories

Since the 1960s, the decolonization of African and Asian nations have brought to the forefront the question of how people of different cultures and religious beliefs can live together as one human family with respect and dignity. The Second Vatican Council issued the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*). The document exhorted all Catholics to "dialogue and collaborate" with other believers. The Vatican established the Secretariat on Non-Christians, later renamed the Pontifical Council of Interreligious Dialogue, to promote greater understanding and cooperation among different peoples.

Member churches of the World Council of Churches began discussing how people of different faiths, cultures, and ideologies could work toward building communities in the late 1960s. The World Council of Churches created a sub-unit called Dialogue with People of Living Faiths. Interreligious dialogue was then replaced with interfaith dialogue. Through its various programs, conferences, and projects, the sub-unit worked to foster a "wider ecumenism" beyond the boundaries of Christianity.

Living in a context in which Christianity has been historically the dominant tradition, many Western Christians believe that Christianity is the only true religion. The question for them becomes, How can one uphold the centrality of Christianity on the one hand, and try to live and engage non-Christians, who were called "pagans" or "heathens" in an earlier time, on the other? Those with a more liberal stance want to engage in dialogue to learn to live in an increasingly pluralistic world.

Interfaith dialogue in Asia has followed quite a different trajectory, and the concerns are markedly different from those of the West. Aloysius Pieris, S.J., who is from the poor and violence-laden country of Sri Lanka, cannot afford to separate religion from the social and economic realms. He points out that the majority of the hungry and poor people of the world are non-Christians, and we cannot achieve world peace without learning their religious symbols and their visions for life, and collaborating with them in concrete action. He writes poignantly:

The irruption of the Third World is also the irruption of the non-Christian world. The vast majority of God's poor perceive their ultimate concern and symbolize their struggle for liberation in the idiom of non-Christian religions and cultures. Therefore, a theology that does not speak to or through this non-Christian peoplehood is an esoteric luxury of a Christian minority.

The plurality of Asian religious traditions was a thorny issue when Asian feminist theology became a focal point of ecumenical debates since the early 1990s. South Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kyung delivered a controversial keynote address, “Come Holy Spirit—Renew the Whole Creation.” at the seventh assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra in 1991. Clad in a Korean peasant costume, Chung used a shamanistic ritual, East Asian philosophical concepts, and Buddhist symbols to expand the understanding of the work of the Spirit. The ensuing debate of her presentation centered on the limits of diversity, the boundaries of Christian identity, the danger of syncretism, and the rights of younger churches to use their own cultural resources to articulate theology.

When the issue of syncretism was vigorously debated, Asian feminist theologians emphasized that Asian women’s popular religion and spirituality have seldom focused on purity of beliefs and doctrines. Their spiritual practices are more fluid and their religious identities less rigid. Asian women have often explored and combine prayers, rituals, and healing techniques when they approach different sources for sustenance.

Interfaith Dialogue and Postcolonial Analysis

The different trajectories of interfaith dialogue illustrate clearly the politics of dialogue, coming out from a long period of colonialism in which the cultures and religions of the non-Christian world were considered inferior. I argue that we must go behind the Eurocentric, academic, and middle-class preoccupations of trying to search for common religious experience or to enlarge our horizon through borrowing other peoples’ religious mirror.

Postcolonial studies have been introduced to the study of the Bible, religion, and theology since the mid-1990s, almost two decades behind the conversations in the fields of humanities and social sciences. I would like to introduce several important volumes, such as Musa Dube’s *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, R. S. Sugirtharajah’s *The Postcolonial Bible Reader*, and my own *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*. British religious scholar Richard King questions the construction of “religion” as a universal category. He argues that “religion” is an important category in the imaginary cartography of Western colonialism: the secular modern West is contrasted with the mythic East, which is seen as steeped in mysticism and unchanging traditions.

In Western cartographical imagination, different peoples and cultures have often been defined by their “religion.” The different “world religions”— such as “Hinduism,” “Buddhism,” “Confucianism,” and “Taoism”—have been constituted as distinct and separate from each other. Syncretism disturbs not only the purity of doctrines, but also the boundaries of religions and cultures and the imaginary map of classification of peoples. Christianity must be held distinct from the Asian religions and cultures; otherwise it would be difficult to argue for its uniqueness and superiority. This argument

is similar to the purity of race, when foreign elements through interracial marriage can be taken as a threat to the bloodline.

Postcolonial studies also shed light on the ambiguous relations among gender, religion, and nationalism. We should ask, for example, why Muslim women wearing the veil would become such a contentious issue in politics in France, England, and the Netherlands. Why is it that the woman in veil has become the symbol of the subordination of women and thus the inferiority of Islamic culture when compared to Western culture? Women in the Third World, and Muslim women included, are often caught between Western liberalism on the one hand, and nativist and nationalistic sentiments on the other. In *A Silent Revolution*, Leila Ahmed has shown how Muslim women from Egypt to the United States have used the veil as a means to redefine their cultural and religious identity.

Therefore, before we enter into any dialogue, we must be critically aware of how religious difference has been constructed and under what circumstances dialogue has been conducted. Sadly, some of the colonial assumptions are still deep-seated, well and alive, and continue to hamper any meaningful encounter of people of different faiths.

Future Possibilities

There have not been many opportunities for Jewish-Christian dialogue in the non-Western world. When I studied theology in graduate schools, I studied the theology of Martin Luther but was not exposed to the critique of his anti-Jewish biases. In studying the New Testament, I was not fully aware that the sharp contrast drawn between Jewish law and Christian Gospel in many scholarly works could lead to anti-Jewish sentiments. We need to be more conscious of the impact of anti-Semitism of Western scholarship in the global study of Christianity. Many theological libraries in the Global South still carry primarily theological works of an older generation. Some of the newer works that are more sensitive to anti-Jewish biases have not become accessible in the Global South and we need to collectively strategize about this unequal access to more current scholarship.

The formerly colonized peoples and marginalized others have been historically isolated and separated from one another because of lack of resources and of the divide and rule tactics. The biggest challenge for interreligious solidarity in our postcolonial condition is how to enable the oppressed peoples to mutually recognize each other and create a political solidarity narrative to galvanize support. If we survey the global scene, we will see that peacebuilding has become a very powerful rallying point and unifying narrative for grassroots people of different faiths to mutually recognize each other and work in solidarity. An example is the Women in Black movement, an interfaith grassroots women's movement whose motto is "For justice, against war." The movement first started in January 1988 in Israel/Palestine, as women stood in silent vigils, holding up a black sign with "Stop the Occupation" written on it. The movement quickly spread to other countries, and has become "a world-wide network of women committed to peace

with justice and actively against injustice, war, militarism, and other forms of violence.” Members of Women in Black come from many national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, and together they want to educate and influence public opinion to stop war and violence. Other grassroots have also been active in justice and peace movements.

Coming from a Chinese background and having just traveled in China, I would like to see more studies of interreligious relations along the Silk Road. When I was in Xi’an, the ancient capital of China, I visited the Big Wild Goose Pagoda, when the monk Xuanzang spent decades translating Buddhist Scriptures he had carried back from India in the seventh century. I also visited the great mosque of Xi’an, built in Chinese architectural style, dated back some 1,300 years ago. The Muslims had come from Persia, Inner Asia, and India. Our group went to Beilin to see the Nestorian tablet, which commemorated the arrival of Syrian missionaries to China in the 7th century. I was fascinated by the encounter of different cultures and religions in this ancient capital, which was the beginning of the Silk Road in the East. Our School has organized a conference last March on “What Would It Take to Move the Map: Abrahamic Traditions on the Silk Road.” Some of the lessons gleaned from the historical encounters of different traditions along the ancient trade route will be very helpful for us today.

John Thatamanil, an Indian American professor of theology, says that we need to develop a binocular religious vision for our age. We need to foster “the capacity to see the world through more than one set of religious lenses and to integrate into one life, insofar as possible, what is disclosed through those lenses,” he says. My hope in interreligious dialogue is rekindled when I see what grassroots women are doing. Rini Ralte is an Indian Christian woman, who has studied feminist theology in my school. She is now in charge of women’s studies at Union theological Seminary in Bangalore. With women of diverse backgrounds, she joined the Women in Black movement in Bangalore, and demonstrated against nuclear power after the earthquake and tsunami in Japan. I hope that we will continue to foster dialogue and interreligious relations in our continued struggle for an alternative common future.