

IS A MULTI-RELIGIOUS IDENTITY THEOLOGICALLY PLAUSIBLE? SOME POST-LIBERAL REFLECTIONS

Dr. Jyri Komulainen, University of Helsinki, Finland (jyri.komulainen@helsinki.fi)

IAMS 2004 Conference, July 31 - August 7, 2004, Port Dickson, Malaysia

The history of religions with its internal dynamics shows how religions and cultures have always encountered each other.¹ Hence our era does not represent anything totally novel. One could even argue that Europeans have lived for centuries in delusion of isolation that is crumbling due to accelerated process of globalization.² Curiously, as our world is, so to say, dwindling due to phenomena as media, air traffic, Internet and migration, our consciousness of the “Other” is becoming stronger than ever. This “Otherness” involves also religious dimensions as our neighbor finds the meaning of his or her life through another narrative than ours.

The contemporary situation entails new and interesting prospects for theology. A new discipline of systematic theology, the theology of religions, has emerged.³ If Christian theology wishes to be up-to-date and credible, it cannot ignore the challenge posed by competitive religious claims.⁴

In this article, I will highlight an issue, which poses a real challenge for Christian dogmatics. Religious traditions encounter each other not only in everyday life in the city or academic discussion, in which different themes could be exposed and compared, but more and more also in the very existence of such people who are born in the crossroads of religious traditions.

One example of such multi-religious identity is Catalan-Indian Raimon Panikkar who is one of the most distinguished contemporary theorists of interreligious dialogue. His identity extends

¹ See e.g. *Halbfass* 1990, which provides an ample evidence of myriad of encounters between Indian religions and the West in history. Similarly, see e.g. *Goddard* 2000 for the long common history of Islam and Christianity.

² For the ignorance of other religions in the European history, see e.g. *Sullivan* 1992, 52-53. A theological analysis of the contemporary state of affairs is provided in *Schreiter* 1997. See also *Wilfred* 1995 for a critical view of reckoning globalization as a new phenomenon, or as one affecting the entire globe.

³ For definition of the theology of religions and its methodology, see *Dupuis* 1997, 1-19. See also *Schreiter* 1998, 521: “The theology of religions is arguably at once the most urgent and the most controverted area that Christian theology faces today.” The amount of the literature on the issue is extensive, which is evident from the bibliographies in, e.g., *Dupuis* 1997, 391-423; *DiNoia* 1992, 171-194.

⁴ E.g. Barth (1998, 103) states: “Was heute denjenigen gefordert ist, die berufshalber oder aus privatem Interesse über den christlichen Glauben nachdenken, ist ohnehin mehr: Es gilt, die einzelnen Lehraussagen im Kontext der nichtchristlichen Religionen gleichsam “durchzudeklinieren”, sie auf scheinbare oder echte Relationen hin zu befragen und Übereinstimmung wie Differenz herauszuarbeiten.” See also *Barth* 2001, which aims at presenting Christian dogmatics in the context of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

his innate Hindu-Christian identity to new dimensions, as the following quotation shows: "... I am at the confluence (*sangam*) of the four rivers: the Hindu, Christian, Buddhist and Secular traditions."⁵

All this brings forth fundamental questions regarding the encounter of religions. How can one maintain his or her identity at the confluence of four rivers? To what extent such an identity is plausible?

On the problematic nature of the category of 'religion'

When assessing the issue of multi-religiosity, the culturally specific nature of the category 'religion' should be taken properly into account. There are no such entities that could unambiguously be recognized and defined as such 'religions.' As we comprehend it, the concept 'religion' (*religio*) is forged in the discursive tradition of Christianity and the ensuing Enlightenment. This legacy could be seen, for instance, in strong literary bias and in the way that 'religion' is understood in the context of the questions regarding truth and falsity. Consequently, the adherence to particular doctrines or beliefs is highlighted as decisive aspect of religious affiliation. Cognitive dimensions thus overpower ritual practices, for instance. With its constructed category of 'religion,' the West then began its search for parallel phenomena in other cultures.⁶

Actually, most of the phenomena labeled as 'religions' could be seen as a variety of cultural traditions. The original Latin meaning of *religio* had more to do with rituals and traditions inherited from the ancestors.⁷ Instead of an obsession with a particular concept, we should reshape our approach accordingly, and try to understand the theology of religions more as an exploration among cultural dynamics than as a clearly defined issue of conflicting world-views. Cognitive contents of cultural traditions are not easily systematized. We could take as an example, say, rituals that are conducted to pay due respect to ancestors. One can find such rituals in most traditional cultures. A crucial question is to what extent such rituals can be seen to contain dogmatic elements. Is it plausible, for example, to say that some rituals are 'true,' and some are 'false'?

⁵ Panikkar 1981, x. Cf. also Panikkar 1978, 2: "I 'left' as a Christian, I 'found' myself a Hindu and I 'return' a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian." For a detailed analysis of Panikkar's pluralistic thinking, see *Komulainen* 2003.

⁶ See *King* 1999, 35-72, which provides a detailed and critical overview of this issue. See also *Stietencron* 1997; *Tripathi* 1997, 121-123. See also *Charlesworth* 2002, 1-4, in which the general shift of the atmosphere in the field of religious studies is lucidly put forward.

⁷ See *King* 1999, 35-37.

Many practices categorized as ‘religious’ are rather local cultural traditions that could be linked to different theologies. Quite typically, people are just practicing the age-old rituals without explicit knowledge of the theological ideas, which the elite understands as a decisive factor.⁸

Above-mentioned does not mean, however, that we should deny the existence of a myriad of different world-views—such as Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist theologies that have respective identities. There are, indeed, a number of structural ideas that shape the inchoate mass of cultural traditions and provide them with a transcendental goal—at least in the point of view of the educated elite. The existence of such interpretative ‘meta-levels’ does not entail, however, that we should *uncritically* speak about monolithic entities as ‘world religions.’ There is no reason to relapse into essentialist fallacy that there is a separate and clearly defined category called ‘religion.’

Religions and their different ends

In the recent discussion concerning the theology of religions, the diversity of religious ends and ways of lives is highlighted.⁹ The widespread idea that all religions eventually lead to the same end¹⁰ pays no due attention to the fact that the way of life and its goal are closely intertwined together. The Christian idea of ‘heaven’ as the contemplation of the Triune God and the Buddhist conception ‘nirvana’ do differ from each other as the Christian ideal of life differs from the Buddhist one. Interestingly, a renowned Buddhist scholar wrote after reading a book on Catholic saints that a Buddhist could approve none of these. Seen from a Buddhist perspective, being a virtuous Catholic measures up to being a bad Buddhist.¹¹

The divergence between religions as well as their total character makes it impossible to separate the goals of a religion from the means of pursuing them. The goals of religions, e.g. the ways of understanding the salvation, are as diverse as the ways of living that religions endorse.¹²

A similar problem is embedded also in so-called “perennialism,” which advances the idea that, in the end, all religions teach the same age-old wisdom and have their roots in the same experience. Perennialistic theories neglect the fact that human experience is always shaped by certain

⁸ Of course, any ritual implies a certain ontological liability. On the other hand, rituals which resemble each others as external acts may be part of different metaphysical frames of references. Regarding this, see also the astute analysis of Sundermeier (1997, 388-389, 392-393) that provides support for the distinction between the ritual itself and the doctrinal conceptualization attached to it.

⁹ See especially *DiNoia* 1992; *Heim* 1995; *Heim* 2001.

¹⁰ On the neo-Hindu background of this idea, see *Komulainen* 2000.

¹¹ See the quotation of Edward Conze in *DiNoia* 1992, 34.

socio-cultural factors. The experiences of mystics are, thus, not versions of the “same” experience that are expressed in different languages. Rather, it should be emphasized that an experience is possible only in particular language and interpretative frame of reference. Therefore, the content and the form of an experience cannot be separated.¹³

Assessed against the background of recent discussion, ‘religion’ as a unifying category seems to be highly problematic. The term that should be mainly descriptive threatens to become prescriptive. However, we cannot dispense with such conventional term easily. For the sake of practicality, I would like to use the term in a qualified way, and propose a minimal definition of religion which takes appropriately into account these critical observations: such cultural structures can be labeled as ‘religious’ which aim at—either implicitly or explicitly—providing human beings with an ultimate, transcendental fulfillment of life.¹⁴

Essence of Christianity?

In the light of above-mentioned, it seems that, in the encounter of religions, it is not the case of clear-cut religions with unequivocally defined doctrines. Rather, the meeting of religions is part of the overall dynamics of culture, and thus a fluid process. Certain practices and ways of thinking encounter each other in a historical process that reshapes them creating new complexes. The encounter of religions does not encompass different interpretations of the “same,” but, quite contrary, comprises a complex hermeneutics of disparate human positions that represent reciprocally “the Other.”

This does not, however, exclude the possibility that, due to multiplicity of traditions, there may be also an occasional trace of familiarity alongside the Otherness. For instance, even though there are a number of fundamental differences between Christian and Hindu traditions, one can find some astonishing similarities such as the Hindu conception that *Brahman* is ultimately *Saccidananda*, i.e. ‘Being-Consciousness-Bliss.’¹⁵ As Hinduism seems to have a Trinitarian concept of Divine in *Saccidananda*, it does not surprise that many Christians have addressed this concept when theologizing in the Hindu context. Of course, they have utilized the Hindu concept as Christians thus

¹² See e.g. *DiNoia* 1992, 5-9, 34-64.

¹³ See *King* 1999, 161-186.

¹⁴ The word ‘transcendental’ tries here to maintain the difference between religion and ideology. Cf. also how Ninian Smart (1989, 21-25) proves the strong resemblance between religions and ideologies.

¹⁵ For a more detailed explication, see *Boyd* 1974, 21, 82-84.

enriching the Hindu tradition with their Christian presumptions, e.g. such as that it is the Trinitarian God who works mysteriously also in the Hindu tradition.

If my remarks on the problematic nature of the concept 'religion' as well as on the diversity of religious traditions are correct, the encounter of religions is an open-ended process. One cannot determine its results in advance.¹⁶ A number of factors have impact on the result, e.g. the power relations prevailing, or the interpretations presented.¹⁷

If one participates in such an open-ended encounter as Christian, is it possible to detect any factor upon which the Christian identity should be built? In other words, does the Christian identity have any "essence"? I am well aware of the fact that searching for an essence of a phenomenon is not in fashion. Such models that aim at giving a final explanation of a phenomenon, or search for its permanent character, are rightly looked with suspicion today.¹⁸ Reality exceeds our aptitude to comprehend it. As any other living phenomenon of reality, Christianity's contours are evasive and dynamic. Nonetheless, I think that a multi-religious situation demands us to sketch—at least to some extent—what is the gist of Christianity.

The essence of being Christian does not consist of subscribing to certain doctrines or some abstract principles. Instead, a concrete historical person is at the center.¹⁹ Christian faith is a historical movement that has its origins in the mission, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The strong tide of Christianity has overflowed and diverged into many channels. Anyone dedicating him or herself to that historical process could be counted as a Christian. The Christological foundation and center is intrinsically related to our human reality. Humanness is vital for Christianity as the center of the whole cosmos revolves around a particular human being, albeit simultaneously embodying the divine Mystery—Jesus of Nazareth. Due to its historical foundation, Christian theology cannot ever dispense with the anthropological issue.²⁰

¹⁶ For the radical openness of an encounter, see *D'Costa 2000a*, 99-171. See also *D'Costa 2000b*, in which it is argued that language—including the Christian talk of God—should not be understood univocally.

¹⁷ Perhaps the dimensional understanding of religion as suggested in *Smart 1989*, 10-21, could be of assistance here. It is obvious that an encounter may shape up in different ways according to the dynamics of different dimensions.

¹⁸ See e.g. *Tweed 2002*, which tackles the issue who should actually be considered as a Buddhist. The article proves the problematic nature of an essentialist understanding of religion.

¹⁹ So e.g. *Küng 2001*, 26-27, even though the title of his book includes the suspicious word 'essence.' Cf. also the title of German original *Christentum: Wesen und Geschichte*.

²⁰ On the other hand, there lurks also a mysterious dimension behind the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth. According to the traditional Christian understanding, we encounter the profound "Otherness" in Jesus. This divine Otherness is the basis of the doctrine of Christ's two natures.

Contextualizing the faith

If humanness has vital importance, do human cultural categories have any theological significance? I would like to propose an affirmative answer. A human being as a human being is radically open towards transcendence, and this includes also fundamental openness towards God. This openness is shaped by culture. This orientation towards transcendence is more evident in some cultural traditions than in others. Thus they are seen as more 'religious.'

Nevertheless, every human being lives his or her life as embodied in a certain culture, through certain particular narratives. Therefore, neglecting this cultural dimension would be not only theologically unwise but also anthropologically impossible. When God encounters a human being, he saves him or her as a being existing in a particular culture. Incarnation entails that the Christian conception of the Divine action does not dispense with social and embodied dimensions of the human life.²¹

Incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth means, on the other hand, that God exists as one particular person in history, binding thus himself to an apocalyptic preacher in certain spatio-temporal coordinates. This is the foolishness of the Christian faith. (1Cor. 1: 20-25).²² Does this mean that Christianity is intrinsically tied to a certain Mediterranean culture, and thus incapable of adapting itself to other cultures? I think the following distinction is appropriate and helpful. Christianity has indeed indissoluble relationship to the ancient Palestine, as far as the *historical* point of view is concerned. This, however, does not entail that the Christian faith were not able to take root in other cultural and geographical contexts, if the issue is addressed *systematically*.

Although Jesus of Nazareth invoked the God of Israel in his teaching and thus took a stand in one particular tradition, the scope of his action was eventually universal.²³ As already alluded above, the fact of the Divine incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth entails that God has tied himself with humanity. This means that Christian faith has to be contextualized in new human contexts.

The idea of contextualization is not novel, of course. A Bengali theologian, Brahma-bandhav Upadhyaya (1861-1907), was an outstanding instance of profound cultural contextualization. His plea for genuinely Indian Christianity took place decades before than contextual theologies became fashionable in our academic theology. Upadhyaya was a Brahmin who converted to Christianity, and began the search for Indian Christianity adopting e.g. the traditional role of *sannyasi*. In the

²¹ See Dupuis 1991, 143-144.

²² See e.g. two volumes of systematic theology written by Robert W. Jenson (1997, 1999) in which the knowing of God through one particular narration is the all-embracing theme.

²³ See Bosch 1991, 25-31.

neo-Thomistic way, he interpreted Hinduism as a natural level upon which supernatural faith could build. Catholicism and Hinduism can live together since Hinduism provides the cultural code, or form, and Catholicism the content:

By birth we are Hindu and shall remain Hindu till death. But as *dvija* (twice-born) by virtue of our sacramental rebirth, we are Catholic [...] Our thought and thinking is emphatically Hindu. We are more speculative than practical, more given to synthesis than analysis, more contemplative than active. [...] In short, we are Hindu so far our physical and mental constitution is concerned, but in regard to our immortal souls we are Catholic. We are *Hindu Catholic*.²⁴

Upadhyaya understanding of Hinduism is rather simplified, and overtly high-caste. Also his fundamental theological conception with its neo-Thomistic flavor is today far more suspicious than in his days. Moreover, one could easily argue that adopting a neo-Thomistic frame of reference is at odds with his intention to construct a genuinely Indian theology.

Noteworthy are, however, Upadhyaya's radically affirmative interpretations of Hindu traditions that ensued a collision with his contemporaries. For instance, he allowed the traditional *Sarasvatipuja* to be celebrated by the wards in a school established by him. Even more outrageous was the reception of the lecture, in which he argued that Krishna, as he is depicted in Bhagavadgita, could be seen as an *avatara* of God. Upadhyaya even let his audience to understand that Krishna may be regarded as a historical and morally respectable figure. However, Upadhyaya tried to emphasize the difference between Krishna and Christ. According to Upadhyaya, Krishna's role is restricted to be a potential moral savior of India while Christ would act as India's savior in the order of grace.²⁵

Upadhyaya was a prominent Christian figure in the days of Bengali nationalism. Without doubt, his nationalistic fervor led him to some obvious excesses. Still, he is a noteworthy example of Hindu-Christianity. Another is above-mentioned Raimon Panikkar whose theology I have studied meticulously in my doctoral dissertation. My analysis shows among other things that Panikkar's concept of Christianity vacillates on the verge of becoming Hindu.²⁶ However, my initial judgment on Upadhyaya would be more positive. On what ground do I make these assessments?

In order to expound the criteria of my estimation, I should return to my initial question. To what extent, and under which criteria, is it possible for the Christian faith to live together with another religious tradition in such a situation in which there are innately more than one religious tra-

²⁴ Lipner & Gispért-Sauch 1991, 24-25. See also Lipner 2001.

²⁵ Lipner & Gispért-Sauch 1991, xliii-xliv.

dition present? This difficult, and to many also existential, question is more acute than ever in families that are multi-religious, for instance.

To conclude, I present a tentative theological thesis: If the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth provide the narrative material that functions as the supporting structure in a multi-religious and multi-cultural situation, this is dogmatically enough.²⁷ Besides this positive criterion, a negative one should be articulated: if another tradition contains such elements that contradict the Christian principles—for instance, such as human sacrifices or caste oppression—, the example of Jesus should transform, or even abolish, these elements. As situations vary, it does not make sense to give any general rules or principles. As a dynamic and creative event, an encounter of religions may well yield unpredictable results. One should not, therefore, regulate its course and should immerse him or herself into dialogue without prejudgments.²⁸

If one completely rethinks the concept ‘religion,’ as the recent discussion suggests, and does not overemphasize the cognitive aspects of Christian faith, a kind of multi-religious spiritual life may be possible. The Christian faith is capable of adapting itself flexibly to different cultural systems, not excluding their religious aspects. Of course, it may turn out in a concrete case that both religious traditions make claims to be the normative tradition that provides the meta-narrative and thus shapes the result of the encounter.²⁹ Multi-religious situation involves the possibility of a genuine conflict. As far as an individual is concerned, the conflict may be severe and existential. However, we should not aggravate the conflict with outdated and unrealistic dogmatic principles.

Barth, Hans-Martin

1998 Christlicher Glaube im Kontext nichtchristlicher Religionen. — Pluralistische Theologie der Religionen. Eine kritische Sichtung. Hrsg. Hans-Gerd Schwandt. Frankfurt am Main: Otto Lembeck, 97-115.

2001 Dogmatik. Evangelischer Glaube im Kontext der Weltreligionen. Ein Lehrbuch. Güterloh: Christian Kaiser.

Bosch, David

1991 Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission. American Society of Missiology Series, No. 16. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.

²⁶ See *Komulainen* 2003, in which I prove that an overall cosmic tone prevails in Panikkar’s work. Due to this, the significance of historical Jesus diminishes. See e.g. my analysis of Panikkar’s Christology in *Komulainen* 2003, 116-138.

²⁷ The question remains open, however, to what extent the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth should be seen as implying doctrinal statements.

²⁸ *D’Costa* 2000a, 133.

²⁹ See here e.g. the astute analysis of Aloysius Pieris (1996, 64-66).

Boyd, R.H.S.

- 1974 India and the Latin Captivity of the Church. The Cultural Context of the Gospel. London.
1975 An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology. Revised edition. Delhi. [1969].

Charlesworth, Max

- 2002 Philosophy and Religion. From Plato to Postmodernism. Oxford: Oneworld.

D'Costa, Gavin

- 2000a The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.
2000b Sexing the Trinity. Gender, Culture and the Divine. London: SCM Press.

DiNoia, J.A., O.P.

- 1992 The Diversity of Religions. A Christian Perspective. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press.

Dupuis, Jacques, S.J.

- 1991 Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions. Translated from the French by Robert R. Barr. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.
1997² Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.

Goddard, Hugh

- 2000 A History of Christian-Muslim Relations. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Halbfass, Wilhelm

- 1990 India and Europe. An Essay in Philosophical Understanding. First Indian Edition. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. [1988].

Heim, S. Mark

- 1995 Salvations. Truth and Difference in Religion. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.
2001 The Depth of the Riches. A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends. Grand Rapids, Michigan & Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans.

Jenson, Robert W.

- 1997 Systematic Theology. Volume I: The Triune God. Oxford - New York: Oxford University Press.
1999 Systematic Theology. Volume II: The Works of God. Oxford - New York: Oxford University Press.

King, Richard

- 1999 Orientalism and Religion. Postcolonial theory, India and 'the mystic East.' London and New York: Routledge.
2000 Indian Philosophy. An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought. Indian Edition. New Delhi: Maya Publishers. [1999]

Komulainen, Jyri

- 2000 Are Religions only Different Ways to the Same Goal? Pluralistic Theology of Religions Discussed. — Swedish Missiological Themes 88, 577-591.
- 2003 An Emerging Cosmotheadric Religion? Raimon Panikkar's Pluralistic Theology of Religions. Diss. Helsinki. [*Forthcoming in Brill's "Studies in Christian Mission" in autumn 2004*]

Küng, Hans

- 2001 Christianity. Essence, History, and Future. Translated by John Bowden. New York: Continuum. [1994]

Lipner, Julius & Gispért-Sauch, George, S.J. (ed.)

- 1991 The Writings of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay. Vol I. Library of Indian Christian Theology. 6. Bangalore: The United Theological College.

Lipner, Julius J.

- 2001 Brahmabandhab Upadhyay. The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. [1999]

Panikkar, Raimundo

- 1978 The Intrareligious Dialogue. New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press.
- 1981 The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany. Completely Revised and Enlarged Edition. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books. [1964]

Pieris, Aloysius

- 1996 Fire & Water. Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity. Foreword by Paul F. Knitter. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.

Schreiter, Robert J.

- 1997² The New Catholicity. Theology between the Global and the Local. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.
- 1998 Christianity in Multi-Religious Societies: Research History and Methodological Questions. — Swedish Missiological Times 86 (1998), 513-530.

Smart, Ninian

- 1989 The World's Religions. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.

von Stietencron, Heinrich

- 1997 Hinduism: On the Proper Use of a Deceptive Term. — Hinduism Reconsidered. Eds. Günther-Dietz Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke. Revised Edition. New Delhi: Manohar, 32-53. [1989]

Sullivan, Francis A., S.J.

- 1992 Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response. London: Geoffrey Chapman.

Sundermeier, Theo

- 1997 Religion, Religions. — Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspective. Eds. Karl Müller et alii. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 387-397.

Tripathi, Gaya Charan

1997 Hinduism through Western Glasses. — Hinduism Reconsidered. Eds. Günther-Dietz Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke. Revised Edition. New Delhi: Manohar, 121-133. [1989]

Tweed, Thomas A.

2002 Who is a Buddhist? Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures. — Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia. Eds. Charles S. Prebish & Martin Baumann. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, 17-33.

Wilfred, Felix

1995 No Salvation Outside Globalization? Some Theological Reflections on a Modern Economic Dogma. — Jeevadhara 25 (1995), 80-92.