

Theological reflections on multi-religious identity

This article attempts to provide a theological assessment of multireligious identity, especially in the context of the Hindu-Christian encounter. The paper rests on recent post-colonialist literature on religion and assumes that the so-called 'religions' are open-ended cultural traditions and that the Christian tradition is capable of encompassing different world-views and cultural traditions.

Following the initial observations, which highlight the ambiguity of the concept 'religion' as well as the radical diversity of the so-called religious traditions, the possibility of delineating a Christian identity in the midst of cultural and religious dynamics is explored. If the common feature of Jesus of Nazareth and the theological idea of incarnation are taken into account, the most vital tenets of the Christian faith entail a constant call for contextualization. Since all cultures also display religious dimensions, i.e. a fundamental openness to transcendence, this contextualization embraces also those traditions that have been labelled traditionally as 'religions'.

In addition to these theoretical observations, two instances of Hindu-Christianity—Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya (1861–1907) and Raimon Panikkar (1918–2010)—are presented and discussed. The article concludes that from the point of view of Christian theology, the Christian faith can also adopt such forms that could be labeled 'multi-religious'. The decisive factor is, however, whether the Christian narrative may provide the meta-narrative of multi-religious identity, i.e. whether it is the one that transforms other cultural narratives.

The history of religions tells us that religions and cultures have always encountered and intersected with each other.¹ Sometimes it is very difficult to say at

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

which point one religious tradition ends and another begins. Human identities are much more complex than simplistic interpretations often divulge.² There are myriad instances showing that the participation in rituals common to many religious traditions is a completely normal way of doing things, at least at the level of so-called popular religion. Asian religiosity especially abounds with flexibility to appropriate different traditions in different situations (Cornille 2002: 1–3).³

Hence our era does not represent anything totally novel. One could even argue that Europeans lived for centuries in the delusion of an isolation that is now crumbling due to the accelerated process of globalization.⁴ Curiously, as our world is, so to say, dwindling due to phenomena as media, air traffic, the internet and migration, our consciousness of the 'Other' is becoming stronger than ever. This 'Otherness' also involves religious dimensions, as our neighbour finds the meaning for 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.⁵ If Christian theology wishes to be up-to-date and credible, it cannot ignore the challenge

2 Illuminating examples related to South Asian religions are provided in Gottschalk 2000; van der Veer 2000: 25–77; Jørgensen 2008 and Jacobs 2010: 113–22.

3 However, it is often expected that religious elite such as Buddhist monks should be committed to the tradition they are representing.

4 On ignorance of other religions in European history, see Sullivan 1992: 52–3.

5 For a definition of the theology of religions and its methodology, see Dupuis 1997: 1–19. A fresh overview of the field is provided in Race & Hedges 2008.



Varanasi is the most famous among many Hindu pilgrimage destinations.

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posed by competitive religious claims.⁶

In this article, I will highlight the issue of multiple religious belonging that poses a real challenge for Christian thinking. Religious traditions encounter each other, not only in everyday street-life or academic discussion, in which various themes could be exposed and compared, but also more and more in the very existence of such people who are born at the intersections of different religious traditions.

One instance of such multi-religious identity is to be found in the work of Raimon Panikkar (1918–2010), who was one of the most distinguished theorists of interreligious dialogue. It is worthy of note that his multi-religious identity is rooted in the fact that his

Catalan mother was a Catholic and his Indian father a Hindu. When Panikkar became acquainted with his paternal heritage in India, he spoke of it in the following words: ‘I “left” as a Christian, I “found” myself a Hindu and I “return” a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian’ (Panikkar 1978: 2). Later he extended his innate multi-religious identity to embrace even secularism, as the following quotation shows: ‘. . . I am at the confluence (*sangam*) of the four rivers: the Hindu, Christian, Buddhist and Secular traditions’ (Panikkar 1981: x).⁷

Panikkar is such an exceptional case that it is no surprise that he has even been characterized as ‘such a “mutational man,” one in whom the global mutation has already occurred and in whom the new forms of consciousness have been concretized’ (Cousins 1979: 143).

If this kind of global mutation is to be expected, one is obliged to find an answer to the theological

6 Hans-Martin Barth (1998: 103) states lucidly: ‘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.’

7 For a detailed analysis of Panikkar’s pluralistic thinking, see Komulainen 2005.

dilemma: is it really possible to be Christian-cum-something? If so, how could following Jesus be juxtaposed with being adherent to another religious tradition?

On the nature of 'religion'

When assessing the possibility 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 'religions' *per se*. As we comprehend it, the concept 'religion' (*religio*) is forged in the discursive tradition of Christianity as well as of the Enlightenment. This legacy could be seen, for instance, in a strong literary bias and in the way that 'religion' is understood in the context of the questions regarding truth and falsity. Consequently, adherence to particular doctrines or beliefs is often understood as being a decisive dimension of religious affiliation. Cognitive dimensions thus overpower ritual practices and emotional experiences. With this constructed category of 'religion', the West has searched for analogous phenomena in other cultures.⁸

Actually, most of the phenomena labelled 'religions' could be seen as cultural traditions. The original meaning of the Latin term *religio* had much more to do with rituals and traditions inherited from the ancestors than is included in our understanding of religion (see King 1999: 35–7). I suggest that we should reshape our approach accordingly, and try to appreciate the theology of religions more as an exploration in cultural dynamics and hermeneutics than as a clearly defined philosophical issue of conflicting world-views.

The cognitive contents of cultural traditions are not easily explicated or systematized. Think of rituals that are conducted to pay due respect to ancestors. Such rituals can be found in most traditional cultures. Is it plausible, for example, to say that some of those rituals are 'true' while others are 'false' in the cognitive meaning of the word? In fact, it seems that many practices categorized as 'religious' are rather local cultural traditions that could be connected to different theologies (see also van der Veer 2000: 82). Quite typically, people are just performing rituals without explicit knowledge of the theological ideas

8 See King 1999: 35–72, which provides a detailed and critical overview of this issue. See also Stietenron 1997 and Tripathi 1997: 121–3.

connected with them.⁹

This does not mean, however, that we should disclaim the existence of different world-views—such as Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist theologies that have distinctive 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 from 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 an essentialist fallacy that there exists a separate and clearly defined category of 'religion', comprising different members such as 'Christianity', 'Islam', 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism'. Substantiating this does not rule out that, at their institutional levels, religious traditions could be clearly demarcated even to the exclusion of double belonging. Nevertheless, even then ideas and practices do interact across the borders.¹⁰

Dynamic traditions having different ends

In the recent discussion concerning the theology of religions, the diversity of religious ends and ways of lives is highlighted (see esp. DiNoia 1992; Heim 1995 and 2001). The widespread idea that all religions eventually lead to the same end¹¹ pays no due attention to the fact that the way of life and its goal are closely intertwined. The Christian idea of 'Heaven' as the contemplation of the Triune God and

9 Of course, any ritual implies a certain ontological liability. On the other hand, rituals which resemble each other as external acts may be part of different metaphysical frames of references. Regarding this, see also the astute analysis of Theo Sundermeier (1997: 388–9, 392–3) which provides support for the distinction between the ritual itself and the doctrinal conceptualization attached to it.

10 John Hick (2005: 6) expresses this neatly: '... the different faiths are not seen as bounded entities set over against one another but more as spheres of spiritual influence—the influence emanating from the teachings of the Buddha, the influence emanating from the teachings of Confucius, and the Taoist influence emanating from the *Tao Te Ching*, and so on. Now while one cannot belong simultaneously to two different institutions with mutually exclusive memberships, one can live within two or more overlapping spheres of spiritual influence.'

11 On the Neo-Hindu background of this idea, see Komulainen 2000.

the Buddhist conception of '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.¹²

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, for example the ways of understanding salvation, are as diverse as the ways of living that religions endorse (see, e.g., DiNoia 1992: 5–9, 34–64).

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 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 its particular language and interpretative frame of reference. Therefore, the content and the form of an experience cannot be separated (see King 1999: 161–86).

Assessed against the background of recent discussion, one could say that 'religion' as a unifying category is highly problematic. The term which should be mainly descriptive threatens to become prescriptive. However, we cannot easily dispense with such a well-known and conventional term as religion. For the sake of practicality, I would propose that we should use the term in a qualified way. This means that one can label such cultural traditions and structures as 'religious' that aim—either implicitly or explicitly—at providing human beings with an ultimate, transcendental fulfillment of life (see Panikkar 2000: 91–2).¹³ However, one should recall that traditions and structures that orientate towards transcendence are inescapably intertwined with a larger cultural dynamism.¹⁴

12 See the quotation of Edward Conze cited in DiNoia 1992: 34.

13 The word 'transcendental' tries here to maintain the difference between religion and ideology. Cf. also how Ninian Smart (1989: 21–5) proves the strong resemblance between religions and ideologies.

14 King 1999: 10: 'The category of religion, in fact, is simply the production of the cognitive "filtering out", or abstraction, of certain aspects of a much broader cultural dynamic.'

Christianity as an incarnational and contextual faith

In the light of the foregoing argument, it seems that, in the encounter of religions, it is not a case of a meeting 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. Distinctive ideas and practices encounter each other in a historical process that reshapes them and creates new constellations. The encounter of religions does not encompass different interpretations of the 'same', but, quite to the contrary, comprises a complex hermeneutics of disparate human positions that represent reciprocally 'the Other'.

This does not, however, exclude the possibility that, due to the 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*, that is 'Being-Consciousness-Bliss'.¹⁵ As Hinduism seems to have a Trinitarian concept of the Divine in *Saccidananda*, it is not surprising that many Christians have addressed this concept when theologizing in the Hindu context. Of course, they have utilized the Hindu concept as Christians, thus enriching the Hindu tradition with their Christian presumptions, such as, for example, that it is the Trinitarian God who works mysteriously also in the Hindu tradition.

If my remarks on the problematic nature of the concept of 'religion', as well as on the diversity of religious traditions are accurate, the encounter of religions is an open-ended process. One cannot determine its results in advance.¹⁶ A number of factors may have an impact on the result—for example, the power relations which prevail.¹⁷

If one participates in such an open-ended encounter as a Christian, is it possible to detect any factor upon which the Christian identity should be built?

15 For a more detailed explication, see Boyd 1974: 21, 82–4.

16 For the radical openness of an encounter, see D'Costa 2000a: 99–171; Cobb 1999: 43–4. 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 by 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.

In other words, does the Christian identity have any 'essence'? I am well aware of the fact that searching for the 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 upon with suspicion today.¹⁸ Reality exceeds our aptitude to comprehend it. As with 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 centre.¹⁹ The Christian faith is a historical movement that has its origins in the mission, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The overflowing tide of Christianity has diverged into many channels. Anyone dedicating him or herself to that historical process could be counted as a Christian. The Christological foundation and centre is intrinsically related to our human reality. Humanness is vital for Christianity as the centre 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 can never dispense with the anthropological issue.²⁰

Every human being lives his or her life as embodied in a certain cultural matrix through certain particular narratives. Therefore, ignoring this cultural dimension would not only be theologically unwise but also anthropologically impossible. When God encounters a human being, he saves him or her as existing in a particular culture. Incarnation entails that the Christian conception of the Divine action does not ignore socially and culturally embodied di-

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

19 E.g. Hans Küng (2001: 26–7), 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.



The Infant Jesus Shrine in Bangalore, visited by both Hindus and Catholics to receive the miraculous blessing of Jesus.

mensions of the human life (see Dupuis 1991: 143–4; Geffré 2002: 95–6).

The incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth means, on the other hand, that God encounters us as one particular person in history. This is the foolishness of the Christian faith. (1 Cor. 1:20–5).²¹ Does this mean that Christianity is intrinsically bound 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 an indissoluble relationship to ancient Palestine, as far as the *historical* point of view is concerned. This, however, does not entail that the Christian faith has not been 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 (Bosch 1991: 25–31). As already al-

21 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.



Ganesha Chaturthi is a very popular Hindu festival during which *murthis* made of clay are worshipped and finally immersed in a lake or a river.

cluded to above, the fact of the Divine incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth entails that God has bonded himself with humanity. This means that the Christian faith has to be contextualized in new human contexts.

Hindu-Christianity as a theological option?

The idea of contextualization is not new, of course. A Bengali theologian, Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya (1861–1907), is a distinguished instance of profound cultural contextualization. His plea for a genuinely Indian Christianity took place decades before contextual theologies became fashionable in the Western academic theology.

Upadhyaya was a Brahmin who converted to Christianity, and began the search for Indian Christianity by adopting, for example, the traditional role of *sannyasi*.²² In the neo-Thomistic way, he interpreted Hinduism as a natural level upon which a supernatural faith could build. Catholicism and Hinduism can co-exist, 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*. (Lipner & Gispért-Sauch 1991: 24–5.)

Upadhyaya's understanding of Hinduism is rather simplistic, and overtly high-caste. Also his fundamental theological conception, with its neo-Thomistic flavour is today far more dubious than it was in his day. Moreover, one could easily argue that adopting the neo-Thomistic frame of reference is at odds with his intention to construct a genuinely Indian theology.

Upadhyaya was a prominent Christian figure in the days of Bengali nationalism. Without doubt, his nationalistic fervour led him to some obvious excesses. His radically affirmative interpretations of Hindu traditions brought him into conflict with his contemporaries. For instance, Upadhyaya allowed the traditional *Sarasvati-puja* to be observed by the wards in a school established by him.

Even more outrageous was the reception of a lecture in which he argued that Krishna, as he is depicted in *Bhagavadgita*, could be seen as an *avatara*

22 On Upadhyaya, see Lipner 2001.

of God. Upadhyaya even gave 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 that of a potential moral saviour of India, while Christ would act as India's saviour in the order of grace. (Lipner & Gispért-Sauch 1991: xliii–xliv.) Some months before his death, Upadhyaya performed traditional rituals through which an excommunicated Hindu is received back to his or her community. However, one can argue that Upadhyaya did not wish to abandon his Christian faith, but to reassert socially his identity as a Hindu.

One could criticize Upadhyaya in that he did not allow his Christian faith to function as a critical principle *vis-à-vis* Hindu culture and its traditional *varnashrama-dharma*. Instead, Upadhyaya ended up defending the caste system, which was reinterpreted in his thinking as a natural order based upon different mentalities and social roles. Therefore, Christianity does not abrogate traditional caste hierarchies, even though it brings equality into the field of religion. (See Lipner & Gispért-Sauch 2002: 105–7.) Nevertheless, Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya should still be remembered as a pioneering example of a dual religious belonging, with his strong vigour for contextualizing the Christian faith in Hindu culture.

Another distinguished instance of Hindu-Christianity is Raimon Panikkar, whom I have already mentioned above. However, the detailed analysis that I carried out in my doctoral dissertation shows that Panikkar's concept of Christianity vacillates on the verge of becoming Hindu. Ultimately, an overall cosmic tone seems to prevail in his work, due to which the meaning of historical Jesus diminishes (see Komulainen 2005).

When assessing theological legacy of these two prominent Hindu-Christians, I think that the Christian faith should be allowed to exist in a more critically transforming relationship with the Hindu tradition. Such a critical distance is needed—whether in social ethics (Upadhyaya) or in cosmology (Panikkar)—that warrants the *Christian* character of Hindu-Christianity.²³

In order to find some criteria for Christian identity in the context of multi-religiosity (e.g. dual religious belonging), I wish to present a tentative theological thesis: *If the life, death, and resurrection*

23 Cf. here Robinson 2004: 187–8 which expounds idea of the 'Christ-centred syncretism' of M. M. Thomas.



One can see colourful deities everywhere in India. Here are the elephant-headed Ganesha and the lingam-symbolizing Shiva.

*of Jesus of Nazareth provides narrative material that functions as the transforming socioethical principle in a multi-religious situation, it is dogmatically enough.*²⁴

The thesis is based upon presumption that religious identity is shaped in a dynamic process in which one can discern three narrative levels—one's own autobiographical story, the cultural story and the canonical story.²⁵ I think that the last-mentioned is of vital importance when evaluating multi-religious identity in terms of Christian dogmatics. To put it in nutshell: a tradition related to Jesus should be in the position of a normative 'meta-narrative' in its relationship with other narrative levels.

This is implicated in the classical idea of *imitatio Christi* as it highlights the vital meaning of following Jesus in being Christian. Christian life is shaped according to narrative of Jesus, even if the religious context is Hindu, Buddhist, or Daoist. This means that if another religious tradition undergirds such principles or practices (e.g. human sacrifice, caste op-

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

25 Stiver 1996: 135: 'We can distinguish between the story, the canonical Scriptures; our story, the cultural narratives and myths that form the background framework of our lives; and my and your story, the personal autobiography and biographies that constitute a central part of our identity.'

pression) that do not square with the Christian tradition, Christian ideals should redress these.

Ultimately Christ should become a life-giving principle in new cultural and religious contexts, as the Jesuit general Pedro Arrupe envisioned in his significant definition of inculturation as

the incarnation of Christian life and the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies then culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about 'a new creation' (quoted in Barnes 2002: 140).

There is no need to give detailed instructions or rules as situations vary greatly. As I have said, the encounter of different religious traditions is inexorably a dynamic process, so it is not possible to indulge in dialogue with some predetermined starting point (D'Costa 2000a: 133). Moreover, the Christian mission should not be an imperialistic one, as Christian life includes a certain degree of passivity in the face of the 'Other' (on this, see Barnes 2002: esp. 27–8).

If one completely rethinks the concept of 'religion', as the recent discussion suggests, and does not over-emphasize 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 (see here, e.g., Pieris 1996: 64–6). The multi-religious situation involves the possibility of a genuine conflict. As far as an individual is concerned, the conflict may be severe and existential.²⁶ However, we should not aggravate the conflict with outdated and exclusive dogmatic principles. ■

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²⁶ Swami Abhshiktananda's Hindu-Christian life is a good example of this kind of inner conflict that came to end with upsetting mystical experience. See Komulainen 2004: 58, 60–2.

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