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Dogma, Praxis, and Religious Perspectives on Multiculturalism

Cecelia Lynch

‘I am a Muslim’, she told us, ‘but I didn’t know that before the war. Before the war, of course, we were all atheists!’¹

—Amira Muharemović

A couple of days later, I saw the maulana, and I told him I thought some of his students believed that terrorism, under certain circumstances, was Koranically acceptable. ‘Then you don’t understand what we are teaching’, he said, frowning for just a moment. ‘There is a great difference between jihad and terrorism’. He invited me to eat with him, to discuss my inability to comprehend the distinction, but I begged off.²

—Jeffrey Goldberg

‘The Lord rideth’, [Father] said, low and threatening, ‘upon a swift cloud, and shall come into Egypt’.

Hurray! They all cheered, but I felt a knot in my stomach. He was getting that look he gets, oh boy, like Here comes Moses tromping down off of Mount Syanide with ten fresh ways to wreck your life.

‘Into Egypt’, he shouted in his rising singsong preaching voice that goes high and low, then higher and lower, back and forth like a saw ripping into a tree trunk, ‘and *every* corner of the earth where *His light*’, Father paused, glaring all about him, ‘where *His light* has yet to fall!’³

—Barbara Kingsolver

I thank David Gitomer, Michael Loriaux, Bill Maurer, and Elora Shehabuddin for saving me from a number of potential errors and misconceptions across fields. I also thank two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments. Any remaining errors, of course, are mine.

1. Quoted in David Campbell, *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity, and Justice in Bosnia* (Minnesota, MN: Univesity of Minneapolis Press, 1998), 1.

2. Jeffrey Goldberg, ‘The Education of a Holy Warrior’, *New York Times Magazine*, 25 June 2000, 36.

3. Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 26.

The first of these quotes is from a scholarly treatise on the problem of alterity and violence in allegedly 'ethnic' politics in the Balkans. It points to the imposition of religious identity from the outside, not by religious fundamentalists but rather by those (in this case, some Serbian leaders) for whom fixed notions of alterity rationalise conflict, as well as by others (the Western press and diplomatic corps, the UN) who attempt to mediate and 'resolve' violence. The second quote is a Western journalist's account of an Islamic school in Pakistan. It demonstrates the distrust of Islamic fundamentalism (itself a controversial label) prevalent in Western media and government circles, and also expresses the author's Orientalist determination to understand the school's teachings on his terms rather than their own.⁴ The third quote forms part of a fictional narrative about the neocolonialist clash of power and religion in the Congo. It also highlights the arrogance that accompanied much Christian missionary activity in Africa, even in the second half of the twentieth century. Each of these quotes, however, also indicates in different ways the degree to which our debates about religion in world politics reflect Enlightenment assumptions. That is to say, each associates religion with danger, dogma, or rigid conceptions of otherness.

Enlightenment concerns about religion in world politics are multiple. Most prominent is the fear that religion, because it addresses such elemental issues as life, death, salvation, right, and wrong, has the power to create 'true believers' who are, at a minimum, psychologically disturbed and at a maximum, inciters of intolerance and violence. True believers become especially dangerous as leaders of mass movements, or when their beliefs are systematised in powerful religious institutions that treat non-members as heretics, deserving of subjugation and even death.

Conversely, following a certain reading of Karl Marx, many charge religions, especially those that espouse a belief in a more perfect afterlife, with muting political demands and serving the interests of the powerful by teaching patience and passivity in the face of injustice.⁵ Both Marxists and secular liberals are concerned that religious belief, as evident in the creationist/evolutionist debate in education, can promote romanticism, ignorance, and backwardness in the face of knowledge and progress. All of these fears assume that religious belief is dogmatic, intolerant, and unchanging. The 'other', as seen through the prism of religious belief, in this view, is inevitably inferior, providing the justification for proselytising, coercion, and violence instead of pluralism and critical thinking. Enlightenment insights were supposed to have overcome these problems, which is

4. Orientalism, according to Edward Said's seminal work, is a Western academic tradition, a style of thought, and a discourse 'by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period'. See *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 3f. See also Fred R. Dallmayr, *Beyond Orientalism* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1996) and Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion, Postcolonial Theory, India, and 'The Mystic East'* (London: Routledge, 1999).

5. This is of course an oversimplification of Marx's arguments about alienation. See, for example, Daniel Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 137-38.

at least part of the reason why religion has been for so long overlooked by International Relations thought. But the return to 'ethnic' violence has renewed attention to religious identity and conceptions of the 'other', giving them troubling connotations today.

Debates about identity and alterity, including the role of religion, have been rife for several decades in political theory, philosophy, and literary criticism. After Edward Said's shot across the bow, published in 1978, in which he exposed the European representations of Islam as 'always a way of controlling the redoubtable Orient',⁶ Tzvetan Todorov in the early 1980s raised the question of whether it was possible for people of different cultures (and religions) 'to experience difference in equality'.⁷ Focusing on the motivations and worldviews of the explorers, conquistadors, and religious leaders who led and justified the conquest of the Americas from the late 1400s through the 1600s, Todorov vividly demonstrates the horrors that resulted from politically and religiously justified notions of alterity. In treating personalities as different as Columbus, Cortés, Las Casas, Sepulveda, Sahagún, and Durán, however, Todorov addresses a range of strategies of inquiry as well as religious stances towards the 'other'. Nevertheless, he questions whether or not the move towards multicultural recognition, made most notably by Las Casas in his later years, becomes 'the first step toward the abandonment of religious discourse itself'.⁸

Moving away from these historical/philosophical critiques (and to a degree away from the subject of religion), worries about the problem of alterity in North America coalesced in the early 1990s into a debate about multiculturalism. The primary questions at issue, prompted by Quebecois separatists and Native American communities, were how to accommodate multiple cultural identities in the democratic polity and whether, and to what degree, to satisfy nationalist aspirations.

As Charles Taylor argued in his now classic 'Politics of Recognition', cultural groups demand (and deserve) recognition and respect. A significant danger, however, is that those adhering to a given identity will refuse the recognition and respect due to others. Given that most contemporary polities exhibit an increase in cultural identities (or at least an increase in their recognition), such a lack of tolerance can have serious consequences, especially for any polity that presumes to be democratic.⁹ And, according to what became the 'communitarian/cosmopolitan' debate, that lack of tolerance can derive from at least two directions: the rigidity of a communal identity that believes itself 'authentic' and superior, or the rigidity of a

6. Said, *Orientalism*, 61.

7. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 249.

8. Todorov thus questions the capacity of 'perspectivalists' who assume the necessary plurality of truth, to commit to religious belief, a debatable position that this article treats later. See *The Conquest of America*, 189-90.

9. Charles Taylor with K. Anthony Appiah, Jürgen Habermas, Steven C. Rockefeller, Michael Walzer, and Susan Wolf, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

universalist (generally liberal) identity that attempts to subsume all particularities but cannot avoid imposing its own.¹⁰

Those 'communitarians' in this debate, who prize cultural identity and want to find room for its expression, see it as positive: a good, within and 'for' liberalism. Other theorists, however, have recast the relationship between identity and multiculturalism to insist on the contingency and changeability of identity. The problem then becomes not how to accommodate relatively fixed, plural identities, but rather how to provide for multiple *possibilities* of identity and culture. As William Connolly states: 'multiculturalism...embodies within itself a quarrel between the national protection of diverse cultural minorities on the same territory and the pluralization of multiple possibilities of being within and across states'.¹¹ Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, David Campbell applies this line of thought to the Bosnian conflict and accuses Western diplomacy of foreclosing instead of fostering such multiple possibilities of being.¹²

But the question remains whether religion should be seen as a special cultural category. Of all of the possible categories of culture and identity, including gender, ethnicity, race, and sexuality, 'religion' is often seen as the least permeable and most essentialist, that which requires the greatest degree of adherence to given behavioural and prescriptive rules. K. Anthony Appiah, for example, states that '[r]eligion...unlike all the others, entails attachments to creeds or commitments to practices'.¹³ Many fear that this type of attachment inhibits thought and blocks critical capacities. Thus, the problem of 'identity' or 'alterity' is believed to assume greater proportions once it takes on a religious cast.

Yet the view of religious identity as uncompromising is historically incomplete and ignores significant and lively debates within religious thought itself. Contemporary theological views on the possibilities of religious pluralism and multiculturalism are enlightening in this regard. Religious thinking has long addressed the problems associated with the existence of multiple forms of belief. Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Jewish thought, among others, continue to grapple with problems of particularism versus universalism, authenticity versus the complexity of history, and doctrinally-oriented versus historically-contingent identities. Some contemporary religious thought also moves beyond individualist categories of identity to provide new ways of thinking about the socio-political implications of the multiple systems of belief present in the world. While these trends do not form a unified system of thought, religious debates can help point the

10. Ibid. For sophisticated treatments of the debate in IR, see Nicholas Rengger, *Political Theory, Modernity, and Postmodernity: Beyond Enlightenment and Critique* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) and Chris Brown, *International Relations Theory: New Normative Approaches* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992).

11. William E. Connolly, 'Pluralism, Multiculturalism, and the Nation-State: Rethinking the Connections', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 1, no. 1 (1996): 61. See also Campbell, *National Deconstruction*, 161.

12. Campbell, *National Deconstruction*, esp. chap. 6.

13. K. Anthony Appiah, 'Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproductions', in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, 150.

way towards a nuanced and historically reliable understanding of 'multiculturalism', and hence, the role of religion in world politics.

In this article I first use recent scholarly, journalistic, and fictional accounts of religion-in-politics to illustrate dominant attitudes about religion and culture. Second, I articulate the range of attitudes toward inter-religious dialogue found in contemporary theological thinking: exclusivism (the position that one's own belief system holds the only possible 'truth', hence it is superior to others, which in turn are wrong and harmful), inclusivism (the position that 'my truth includes your truth', hence that one's own belief system remains superior to others but others contain partial truths), pluralism (the belief that truth itself is multiple, and therefore the position that other religions must be accepted as equals), and syncretism (the belief that what is true is 'life-giving' and invariably takes multiple forms, and hence that it is possible and desirable, as well as inevitable, to merge aspects of different belief systems).¹⁴ I also discuss the concept of apologetics as both a theological attitude and a dialogical process.

These approaches should be seen as heuristic tools that broaden our understanding of religious identity, alterity, and the role of religion in politics, rather than as rigidly bounded categories. I argue that, while contemporary political debates continue to regard religion and belief as necessarily exclusivist, theological trends have for some time focused on the boundaries and possibilities of inclusivism and pluralism. While the existence of exclusivism cannot be ignored in the intersection of religious belief and political practice, and certainly the 'religious professionals' active in the academy are concerned about the apparent hardening of religious identities in many parts of the world, religious thought also reflects trends towards acknowledging, debating, and legitimising religious beliefs through, on one hand, apologetical discourse and, on the other, the syncretic blending of beliefs and practices.

Recent Accounts

The conflicts in Bosnia and more recently Kosovo provide telling examples of the construction of religious identity from the outside, especially on the part of the secularist West. Amira Muharemović, for example, 'discovers' she is a Muslim when the identity is imposed on her by outsiders: Serbian leaders attempting to justify ethnic cleansing, and even more disturbing, Westerners attempting to make sense of the Bosnian violence by categorising and reifying her and thousands of others' identities. Her statement implies that non-belief is cosmopolitan, while being identified as Muslim is anachronistic. Yet she and others also appear to

14. Most students of religion who use these distinctions focus on the first three. See, for example, Harvard Indologist and theologian Diana Eck's, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994). Syncretism is much more contested as a legitimate category, especially among Christian theologians. Korean liberation theologian Chung Hyun-Kyung calls for a 'survival liberation-centred syncretism'. See, for example, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again, Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994).

recognise that they cannot escape the religious identity imposed by others, one which alternately makes them intruders, victims, and new subjects of international law.

One of Campbell's primary points in using this quote is not to fault Islam, Eastern Orthodoxy, or any other religion with instigating violence, but rather to point out the variability and contingency of identity, and to emphasise that the rigid perceptions of Balkan ethnic and religious identities that prevail in Western public discourse and diplomacy are in fact particular constructions that subjugate alternative, interdependent, and pluralist identities. As Campbell shows, pre-war Muslim identities were ambiguous and complex, 'such that a number of the cultural practices of the Muslim community were regarded by their religious instructors as non-Islamic'.¹⁵ Indeed, not only Muslims but all faiths exhibited a lack of dogma: 'fluid confessional definitions are widely reported in Bosnia far into the twentieth century. Ethnographic data show a nondoctrinal attitude toward religion by Bosnians of all three confessions'.¹⁶ For Campbell, then, the task is to develop 'an emancipatory ideal of multiculturalism' that 'affirms cultural diversity without situating it' while also recognising when it 'suppresses cultural interdependence and plurality'.¹⁷

Jeffrey Goldberg's reporting, conversely, is a recent example of the ongoing Western constructions of identity that lie at the heart of Campbell's critique. Goldberg enrolls in the Haqqania madrasa, an Islamic seminary in Pakistan, 'to see from the inside just what this jihad factory was producing'.¹⁸ Though Goldberg acknowledges that he never saw a weapon or heard of a military class in the time he spent at the school, he insists that 'militant Islam is at the core of most' of the country's 10,000 madrasas, especially Haqqania.¹⁹ Goldberg wishes to understand how groups he labels as terrorist are educated, but his preset identifications make understanding difficult if not impossible. He is convinced that the madrasa teaches intolerance and hatred for other religions and Americans, but he observes only rote learning of the Qur'an and Hadith. He takes as gospel the US State Department's definitions of terrorist organisations, yet appears astonished that Arab students can admire Osama bin Laden. He instructs the students in his own interpretation of Qur'anic teachings, while apparently misconstruing important distinctions.²⁰ He acknowledges that the term 'jihad' has several meanings in Islam, and that there

15. Campbell, *National Deconstruction*, 213.

16. Tone Bringa quoted in *ibid.*, 213.

17. *Ibid.*, 208.

18. Goldberg, 'The Education of a Holy Warrior', 34

19. *Ibid.*

20. For example, Goldberg takes the instructors' distinction between *dar-al-Islam* (the Islamic world, or zone of peace) and *dar-al-harb* (the rest of the world) as a sinister and simplistic justification for ongoing military campaigns against the West. Yet Sohail Hashmi points out that this type of rigid bifurcation misreads recent Muslim thinking and takes no account of the multiple interpretations within Islamic fundamentalism. See Goldberg, 'The Education of a Holy Warrior', 64 and Sohail H. Hashmi, 'Interpreting the Islamic Ethics of War and Peace', in *The Ethics of War and Peace: Religious and Secular Perspectives*, ed. Terry Nardin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 158-59.

are multiple interpretations of the Qur'an among Muslims, yet he generalises to all of Islam in asserting 'the fact' that 'wherever Islam rubs up against other civilizations—Jewish, Christian, Hindu—wars seem to break out'.²¹

Yet if Campbell (consciously) and Goldberg (unconsciously) demonstrate the degree to which Westerners construct the religious identities of others, Barbara Kingsolver openly decries such constructions as neocolonialist. *The Poisonwood Bible* is Kingsolver's novel about a Baptist fundamentalist preacher from Jim Crow Atlanta who undertakes missionary work in an isolated Congolese village, narrated through the voices of the preacher's wife and four daughters. The inability of the preacher, Nathan Price, to bend to the realities of life in Africa, let alone acknowledge the validity of Congolese beliefs, is set against the backdrop of the move to independence and the inability of the Belgians to admit Congolese equality, instead abruptly evacuating the country in 1960.

The novel is impressive in its range of expression (each daughter reacts differently to the cultural clash) as well as its ability to portray the insensitivity and cruelty of Belgian, US, and later UN political, economic, and cultural interventions. To its credit, the novel also presents a multifaceted view of religion. Yet the pre-eminent religious spokesperson, Reverend Price, wears Jesus like the cape of a superhero. For him, the Congo is teeming with unsaved souls, and belief in the Christian God will solve all of their problems. Price's dogmatic beliefs range from the impractical to the absurd and even the dangerous. He decides to plant a garden, but brings seeds from Georgia that cannot pollinate in the jungle. He mispronounces Congolese words, making it unclear whether he advocates baptism or terror (or, according to the obvious implication, both). He insists on baptism by immersion in the nearby river without bothering to find out that it is infested with crocodiles, and that no caring parent would ever permit his/her child to be dunked in it. And he supports Western political authority and economic control, even when that authority is proven bankrupt and he himself is penniless, cut off from all Western sources of funds.

In contrast, the local chief and voodoo priest appear to represent a more pragmatic naturalism. But there are still problems when fundamentalist Christianity and African Traditional Religion come face to face.²² The chief and local priest welcome Christian practices as long as they siphon off the community's undesirables, but they worry lest too many converts corrupt the village and offend

21. Goldberg, 'The Education of a Holy Warrior', 70. This is of course a reference to the argument made infamous by Samuel Huntington, 'Clash of Civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22-47. John Esposito asserts that such attitudes are an example of transference of the fear of communism during the Cold War to the fear of Islam today. See *The Islamic Threat, Myth or Reality?*, 3d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 218.

22. African Traditional Religion (ATR) is a composite name for the 'host' religions of Africa (non-Islamic and non-Christian). ATR, 'Christianity, and Islam all vigorously claim the allegiance of Africans, while African Traditional Religion continues to be a major source of meaning and receives formal acknowledgment as a living religion'. See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 110 and Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 39.

the gods. The primary contrast, therefore, is between uncompromising Christian dogma and unspoiled naturalism. When the daughters lose confidence in the rigid beliefs of their father, they turn instead to faith in nature, agnosticism, or atheism. The one character who represents a more pluralist identity is Brother Fowles, the 'papist' Catholic predecessor of Reverend Price. Fowles, who remains in the Congo, combines elements of local religious practices with Christianity, but is dismissed from Western religious institutions as a renegade.

Theological Attitudes and Their Political Correspondents

These recent examples indicate that much of our public discourse assumes that religious attitudes and behaviour are inevitably exclusivist. Yet contemporary theological debates range primarily from inclusivism to syncretism.²³ While these categorisations should be seen primarily as heuristic tools, and in practice a given belief system may contain elements of more than one position, it is useful to distinguish among them in thinking through the political implications of contemporary theological debates on multiculturalism and inter-religious dialogue.

Exclusivism

The exclusivist position argues in favour of the superiority of one's own system of belief as well as the right to propagate it as widely as possible. The political ramifications of such a position are those most feared—and taken as axiomatic—by students of international politics. In political terms, forms of exclusivism justified the Crusades, the Muslim reaction to them, the conquest of the Americas, the Spanish Inquisition, the Reformation, and colonialism. They also provide a basis for longstanding and seemingly insuperable conflicts in the Middle East, Northern Ireland, India and Pakistan, Nigeria, Sudan, and Indonesia, among others. While many scholars understand these forms of exclusivism—and their violent implications for political behaviour—as only partially dependent on religious fanaticism or intolerance (or sometimes as merely a cloak for a more fundamental economic and political power struggle), it is difficult if not impossible to absolve religious motivations for any of these conflicts.²⁴ Exclusivist positions also appear to be at the root of doomsday cults such as those of Guyana, Texas, or more recently, Uganda, whose charismatic leaders' insistence on loyalty has led to violent, albeit less politically powerful and widespread, consequences. When imposed by the powerful, we view exclusivism as oppressive and illegitimate; when practised by the local cult, we see it as tragic.

23. Chung sees these categories as applying primarily to 'the encounter between Christianity and other religions and cultures of the world'. See *The Wisdom of Mothers Knows No Boundaries*, Women's Perspectives: Gospel and Cultures, pamphlet 14 (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1996), 30. Here I apply it more broadly, following the popularisation of the typology in inter-religious dialogue.

24. See, for instance, Todorov, *The Conquest of America* and Théo Tschuy, *Ethnic Conflict and Religion* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1997).

Goldberg's article both assumes exclusivism by followers of Islam and encourages it on the part of non-Muslims:

At any given time, there are several hundred Afghan students at the madrasa, along with dozens from such former Soviet republics as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, and a handful from Chechnya too. To those who see wars like the one in Chechnya as expressions not only of nationalist aspirations but of pan-Islamic ones as well—to those who see a new Islamic revolution on the horizon, a Sunni revolution a generation after the Shia revolution that shook the world—the foreign presence at Haqqania is not comforting.²⁵

Campbell highlights the way in which religious exclusivism is assumed and used by Western policymakers to justify ethnic partition. And Kingsolver's novel presents a compelling portrait of both the powerful and the tragic aspects of exclusivism; the character of Nathan Price is an eccentric vestige of colonialist Christian domination, but Price himself becomes increasingly powerless, penniless, and removed from reality. He continues to act ultra-dogmatically at a point when the relationship between the West's military, economic, and religious purpose has broken down, but refuses to see that the previously tight relationship between raw power and exclusivist proselytising is no longer operable.²⁶ While such extreme portraits of religion are commonplace, exclusivist thinking is extremely contested among religious scholars, theologians, and the major world religions today. Prominent ecumenical organisations actively discourage participation in exclusivist groups, and even some of Goldberg's maulanans disclaim exclusivist politics.²⁷

Inclusivism

Politically, inclusivism also insists on the superiority of one's own belief system. It differs, however, in that it accepts the validity or 'right' of other modes of belief to exist. Nevertheless, it views other religious systems as incomplete or unenlightened. Inclusivism in its political ramifications presupposes a kind of liberal tolerance. The belief remains that one's own religion, all other things being equal, 'should' be universalised, but given the impracticalities and unethical behaviour that imposing a universal belief would necessitate, one must allow, and even acknowledge the partial truth in other systems of belief.

The missionary movement in the first half of this century vacillated between theological exclusivism and a more inclusivist stance. This fluctuation was manifested in two modes. Some missionaries confronted the Eurocentrism of Christianity and attempted to incorporate their message through various forms of

25. Goldberg, 'The Education of a Holy Warrior', 34.

26. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*.

27. See *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1993), 22.

inculturation. These efforts resulted in lively debates about the relationship of the Christian gospel to other religious traditions during the world mission conferences of the 1920s and 1930s, debates that ultimately were left unresolved. More significantly, theological debates in Europe generated by Karl Barth and later Hendrik Kraemer 'made a radical separation between God's self-disclosure in the Bible, culminating in the gospel, and all forms of religious life, which were characterized as "unbelief"'.²⁸ Barth, in particular, was responding to the failure of Christianity to prevent world war, and so charged Protestantism (along with all other religions) with being bonded to human imperfections, vanity, and sinfulness. Yet, despite their subsequent efforts to engage in dialogue with other faith traditions, some mission leaders continued to interpret Barth and Kraemer's theological stance as a reaffirmation of the gospel message, and hence Christianity, as 'truth' while relegating all other faith traditions as merely human, rather than divine, achievements.²⁹

Pluralism

This type of inclusivism, even when it attempted to increase inter-religious understanding, could irritate non-Western religious leaders. Mohandas Gandhi, for example, complained, '[t]here are some who will not even take my flat denial when I tell them I am not a Christian'.³⁰ After World War II, many of the churches that sponsored missions became members of the newly created World Council of Churches, and an influential set of both Christian and non-Christian postcolonial religious leaders increasingly delegitimised inclusivism in favour of a more pluralistic stance.³¹

Thus the World Council of Churches' guidelines on inter-religious dialogue began to state in the 1970s that Christians should not make

judgements about others as though from a position of superiority; in particular they should avoid using ideas such as 'anonymous Christians', 'the Christian presence', 'the unknown Christ', in ways not intended by those who proposed

28. S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Gospel and Culture: An Ongoing Discussion within the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1998), 7

29. Ariarajah, *Gospel and Culture*, 4-7, 14-15.

30. Quoted in Raghavan Iyer, ed., *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 149. See also Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, 'Extracts from My Experiments with Truth', in *Christianity Through Non-Christian Eyes*, ed. Paul J. Griffiths (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

31. In the postwar years the World Council of Churches (WCC) attempted to 'define the right attitude of the [Christian] church to other religious traditions', initiating a study on 'The Word of God and Men of Other Faiths'. From this study came the idea that the WCC should 'develop the concept of "dialogue" as the primary mode of relating to people of other faith traditions'. See *Guidelines on Dialogue*, v.

them for theological purposes or in ways prejudicial to the self-understanding of Christians and others.³²

These types of statements, along with the academic study of religion, have called for an inter-religious dialogue based on a pluralist approach. Pluralism, as in its liberal counterpart, requires an acknowledgement of the multiplicity of truth. This is the belief, as popularly articulated by the later Gandhi or the current Dalai Lama, of the positive similarity of purpose and function of all religions. For Chung Hyun-Kyung, '[p]luralism is the most enlightened position among the three in relation to other religions, respecting differences and living side by side with differences'.³³ Pluralism, therefore, takes the position that one's own beliefs cannot represent the fulfilment or perfection of the beliefs of others; they can neither engulf or subsume others as a partial means to one's own religious goals.

While some theologians dispute the pluralist position as untenable (i.e., how can there be multiple religious truths if belief requires adherence to a particular conception of the truth?), other students of religion see exploring pluralist possibilities as necessary. David Gitomer, for instance, distinguishes between the 'outside' and 'inside' of a religious tradition. These categories do not denote the institutional versus individual or private manifestations of religion. Rather,

[t]he 'outside' of a tradition is the way the tradition articulates itself in teaching formulas both for its members and for outsiders. The 'inside' of the tradition is the collective experience of the reality expressed in those formulas, a reality which...cannot be fully expressed in ordinary human language.³⁴

Gitomer, an Indologist, unfolds the importance of this distinction for the pluralist attitude:

As we begin to apprehend the inside of a religious tradition, we begin to understand its power to lay hold of imagination and forge a vision of the world and its meaning. Without necessarily accepting the truth claims formulated by other faiths, we can nevertheless understand the capacity of another tradition to make a total meaning for its followers. Then the specific religious insights of other traditions may contribute to our own. In other words, grasping the *experiential* truth in one's own religious place enables an openness to the quality of compelling meaning in religious places that are not one's own.³⁵

Likewise, for the World Council of Churches,

32. *Guidelines on Dialogue*, 12.

33. Chung, *The Wisdom of Mothers Knows No Boundaries*, 30.

34. David Gitomer, 'Tell Me One Thing, Krishna: A Personal Reflection on Catholic Faith and Religious Pluralism', in *As Leaven for the World: Catholic Reflections on Faith, Vocation, and the Intellectual Life*, ed. Thomas Landy (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, forthcoming 2001).

35. *Ibid.*

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[T]he aim of dialogue is not reduction of living faiths and ideologies to a lowest common denominator, not only a comparison and discussion of symbols and concepts, but the enabling of a true encounter between those spiritual insights and experiences which are only found at the deepest levels of human life.³⁶

This type of encounter is based on the recognition of the importance of how belief is lived in the everyday experience of different cultures:

[D]ialogue should proceed in terms of people...rather than of theoretical, impersonal systems. This is not to deny the importance of religious traditions and their inter-relationships but it is vital to examine how faiths and ideologies have given direction to the daily living of individuals and groups and actually affect dialogue on both sides.³⁷

Pluralist sensitivity has been promoted over the past several decades, not only within the academy, but also by postcolonial religious thinkers. Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, African and Asian theologians became much more vocal in criticising the legacy of Western missionary activity for its cultural—including religious—imperialism. In the interests of ‘self-expression’, religious thinkers in the Philippines, India, and Kenya demanded moratoriums on Western missions and requested missionaries to leave: ‘the most missionary service a missionary under the present system can do today in Asia is to go home!’³⁸

Apologetics

Yet not all theology is comfortable with the move towards pluralism. For example, despite its negative connotations in contemporary theology, Paul Griffiths has resuscitated an argument in favour of apologetics. Griffiths, a scholar of Buddhism, acknowledges that the notion of apologetics—the defence of the doctrines of a faith tradition—is currently unfashionable in theological circles.³⁹ Yet, he argues in favour of both negative apologetics (the defence of doctrine when beliefs are challenged from the outside) and positive apologetics (the attempt to demonstrate that the doctrines of one’s own belief are consistent and superior to others) as necessary forms of inter-religious dialogue. Griffiths criticises ‘universalist

36. *Guidelines on Dialogue*, 13.

37. *Ibid.*, 11.

38. Emerito Nacpil, quoted in Ariarajah, *Gospel and Culture*, 20.

39. Griffiths states that his conception of apologetics ‘is directed against an underlying scholarly orthodoxy on the goals and functions of inter-religious dialogue. This orthodoxy suggests that understanding is the only legitimate goal; that judgement and criticism of religious beliefs or practices other than those of one’s own community is always inappropriate; and that an active defence of the truth of those beliefs and practices to which one’s community appears committed is always to be shunned’. See *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), xi.

perspectivalism' (the belief that all religions hold a partial perspective on truth) as elitist and ultimately untenable. What would perspectivalists, for example, have to say about the Jonestown cult in Guyana? They 'must construct criteria for separating appropriate affirmations about the ultimate reality from inappropriate ones. They must, in other words, enter into apologetical discourse whether they like it or not'.⁴⁰

Griffiths acknowledges the political problems inherent in this project, and proposes specific, non-coercive conditions under which 'proper apologetics' can take place.⁴¹ He admits that apologetics always occurs within a political context, yet believes that historical examples of proper apologetics exist despite inevitable political problems.

The extensive record of Hindu-Buddhist debate in India from the fourth to the eleventh centuries of the Christian era—much of which can properly be called positive apologetics—is, in large part, simply a vital component of the record of the religious and intellectual life of India, and not the record of the oppression of one group by another...And even Peter the Venerable's apologetic against Islam in twelfth-century Europe, developed as it was at the time of the Crusades, is the work of a man who appears to have rejected the idea of the Crusades as a simple adventure in military conquest.⁴²

Griffiths' apologetics at first glance appears to be a form of inclusivism in that it rejects exclusivist modes of action while continuing to defend a particular doctrine, though the analogy is incomplete. In this light, the most evident political problem with either apologetics or inclusivism, in general, is whether it can sustain itself without sliding into exclusivist reaction and violence against different modes of belief.

Griffiths' answer is to insist that there is nothing in the belief in the truth of one's own doctrines that requires violence or discrimination against others.⁴³ But more importantly, we need to recognise the ways in which this form of argument parallels aspects of inclusivism without completely replicating it. Apologetics is primarily a dialogical process, not an ethical endpoint. Thus the process of apologetics can logically result in any ethical standpoint towards other religions, from exclusivism to syncretism. Moreover, in the end, it is the very existence of a political context that, for Griffiths, makes apologetics necessary:

engagement in apologetics...is required for religious communities in some settings...to begin to understand, among many other things, why some British

40. *Ibid.*, 49.

41. Apologetics should be an occasional, not systematic, practice of religious spokespersons and occur only when doctrines are challenged from the outside, it should not threaten violence, it should not be part of a 'program of military, economic, or cultural imperialism', and it should not be based on an 'assumption of ethnic or cultural superiority'. See *ibid.*, 78.

42. *Ibid.*, 79.

43. *Ibid.*, 62.

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Muslims feel impelled to burn anti-Islamic books in Bradford, why some Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka feel called upon to foster and encourage anti-Tamil violence, and why some conservative Catholic Christians in the United States of America are willing to bomb clinics.⁴⁴

Griffiths does not condone such projects as exercises in proper apologetics, but argues that it is only through active engagement and argument about the validity of doctrine that the beliefs underlying such actions (and one's own beliefs to the contrary) can be understood. His project thus points the way towards a new approach to understanding doctrine, including what is generally labelled fundamentalism.

Syncretism

Struggles to find legitimacy for pre-colonial practices and beliefs in the context of world religions have also pushed theology beyond simple pluralism to notions of 'indigenisation', 'inculturation', and 'syncretism'. These concepts indicate that, contrary to the dominant portraits painted by Kingsolver, postcolonial religious thought has absorbed, challenged, and changed religious dogma in significant ways.⁴⁵

Syncretism acknowledges and embraces the multiplicity of religious traditions that exist not only within a multicultural society, but also within the individual. The very existence of this syncretism, of course, is often the result of exclusivist politics such as those carried out through colonialism. Nonetheless, the legacy of exclusivism in the Third World has not necessarily been the wholesale adoption of an essentialist understanding of Christianity or Islam. Rather, the very practice of world religions in other contexts has challenged and in some cases revised doctrine. For example, Jean-Marc Ela, a Cameroonian theologian, published *African Cry* in 1970 to expose the 'crisis in the local churches of black Africa', calling into question not only the history of Christian missionaries and the practice of Christianity, but also the central doctrine of the Eucharist.⁴⁶ In Africa, this challenge developed into a debate over whether inculturation or liberation should be the central task of the churches.⁴⁷ But inculturation, especially, implied not only a pluralist stance towards other systems of belief, but also the incorporation of elements of African Traditional Religion (and also, at times, Islam) into Christianity. Yet, while 'indigenisation' became increasingly validated in

44. Ibid., xi.

45. Scholars of religion as well as anthropologists debate the degree to which this fact disrupts the orientalist argument of Said. For an excellent treatment of this issue, see Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion*.

46. Jean-Marc Ela, *African Cry* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986). The book was originally published as *Le Cri de l'Homme Africain* (Paris: Librairie-Éditions L'Harmattan, 1980).

47. Emmanuel Martey, in *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation*, argues that both function symbiotically.

theological circles, the term 'syncretism' continued to have negative connotations into the 1990s.

The World Council of Churches worried about the 'risks' of syncretism at the same time that demands for inculturation were on the rise, and asked in the late 1970s, 'is syncretism a danger for which Christians must be alert?'⁴⁸ If syncretism means 'conscious or unconscious human attempts to create a new religion composed of elements taken from different religions', then it can, according to its critics, give rise to two dangers: first, that of going 'too far and compromis[ing] the authenticity of Christian faith and life', and second,

that of interpreting a living faith not in its own terms but in terms of another faith or ideology. This is illegitimate on the principles of both scholarship and dialogue. In this way Christianity may be 'syncretized' by seeing it as only a variant of some other approach to God, or another faith may be wrongly 'syncretized' by seeing it only as partial understanding of what Christians believe that they know in full.⁴⁹

Likewise, Pope John Paul II has striven during his tenure to contain what he believes to be the dangers of syncretism, arguing against it both on the grounds that it confuses 'the basic mysteries of Christian faith', and that it is 'totally contrary to real ecumenism'.⁵⁰

In contrast, a number of theologians not only promote syncretism as an ethical and theological position, they also acknowledge it as an anthropological and historical process. The debate about syncretism came to the forefront in inter-religious dialogue in 1991, when Chung gave a speech at the Canberra assembly of the World Council of Churches.⁵¹ For Chung, even the pluralist model is

too academic, Western, and male. It is too academic because it treats the different religions as neatly arranged entities in clearly marked categories labelled Buddhism, Christianity, Shamanism, Confucianism, and the like. But this form of pluralism, in which the separate categories are distinct and do not cross one another's boundaries, exists only in academia. When I look at the popular religiosity of Asian women, the religions do not exist in that neat way under these name tags. There is a messy and fluid process of cross-permeation among the different religions...I think this neatly separated pluralism is for male-centred institutional religions, because maintaining purity of doctrine has been the centre of their concern. But when I look at everyday life-based women's cosmic spirituality in Asia, it is clear that what matters is not

48. *Guidelines on Dialogue*, 14.

49. *Ibid.*, 14-15.

50. Quoted in Jeffrey Carlson, 'Crossan's Jesus and Christian Identity', in *Jesus and Faith: A conversation on the Work of John Dominic Crossan*, eds. Jeffrey Carlson and Robert A. Ludwig (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 35-36. The Catholic Church's recent statements on the superiority of Catholicism would also seem to harm such 'real ecumenism', however.

51. Ariarajah, *Gospel and Culture*, x-xi, 47-50.

doctrinal purity, but what is liberating, what is healing, what is life-giving. Therefore the word 'pluralism' as used in academia cannot really describe Asian women's religiosity.⁵²

Chung, Ela, Emmanuel Martey, and others thus indicate the degree to which syncretism is a reality of postcolonial life.⁵³ Chung tells the story of a Korean woman who uses Shaman rituals to obtain justice when her child is accidentally killed by a public official to demonstrate that, whatever religious leaders say or do, Koreans will continue to blend Shamanism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity in their everyday lives.⁵⁴ In this view, syncretism simply exists (and has always existed).

Moreover, Jeffrey Carlson extends the notion of syncretism from postcolonial identity to the very essence of all religious identity. Carlson juxtaposes statements by Anselme T. Sanon, an African Catholic bishop, Raimon Pannikar, a self-proclaimed 'multi-religious self' (Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist), and the anthropologist James Clifford to argue not only that all religion is, 'inevitably, a form of syncretism', but also that

the phenomenon of religious interpenetration...is at the very heart of personal and communal religious identity. To have a religious identity is, inevitably, to be a 'syncretic self', the product of a process of selective appropriation, internalizing elements drawn from vastly varied pools of possibility.⁵⁵

Thus we cannot escape syncretism, either at the level of individual religious identity or as an inevitable social and historical process. Moreover, while religious syncretism is certainly not static, it develops in historical and ideational contexts that can be identified.

To understand the implications of syncretist thinking, we should be aware of both the distinction and the linkages between syncretism as an ethical and theological position and syncretism as a historical process.⁵⁶ Some anthropologists,

52. Chung, *The Wisdom of Mothers Knows No Boundaries*, 30-31.

53. It is also a reality of life in a world in which migration levels are continually on the rise. For example, the 'ethnic composition' of the population of Orange County, California, has shifted tremendously in the past two decades, and the student body of University of California, Irvine reflects this shift. 'Higher Education in Orange County', *Orange County Profiles*, (Fullerton, CA: Center for Demographic Research, CSU, 1998). A number of students in my international relations course testified to the hybridity of their own religious identities, stemming from both the colonial experiences of their parents (primarily in Asia) and the experience of migration to the United States: one was a Muslim educated in Catholic schools, another vacillated between Buddhism and Christianity, another's family was 'born-again', but retained Shamanist practices, etc.

54. Chung, *The Wisdom of Mothers Knows No Boundaries*, 28-29.

55. Carlson, 'Crossan's Jesus and Christian Identity', 38.

56. Both should be distinguished from the debate in anthropology about syncretism as a type of biogenetic necessity. Neither the notion that religious identity is inevitably a product of the historical interpenetration of identities, nor the ethical stance that legitimises culling what are deemed 'positive' religious and cultural beliefs and practices, necessarily implies any biological understanding of hybridity. On this debate in anthropology, see William Maurer, *Recharting the Caribbean* (Ann Arbor,

for example, question the utility of syncretism as both an analytical concept and a solution to religious violence. If all religion is ultimately syncretic, we must then also see the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the Reformation, among other instances of religious violence, as syncretic processes that have resulted in highly exclusivist practices.⁵⁷

Theologians such as Chung and Carlson have attempted to address these reservations by going beyond the historical recognition of syncretic processes in constituting religious belief. Both argue in favour of understanding syncretism as a fact of religious life. Yet, at the same time, Chung is attempting to legitimise a conscious ethical and theological position that she calls 'survival liberation-centred syncretism'.⁵⁸ Carlson, similarly, sees value not only in recognising syncretism historically, but in promoting syncretic understanding as a means of 'responding creatively to violence in this "death age"'.⁵⁹ Understanding syncretism, for Carlson, breaks down the violence of self/other categorisations. 'When identity is inevitably syncretic, under whose banner should we fight? And who are they, our enemies?'⁶⁰ For these theologians, reflexivity and self-awareness in syncretic ethics can lead to a) liberation from oppressive theologies, and b) the collapse of reified notions of alterity in favour of 'religious deterritorialisation', such that there is no concrete 'other' against whom we can engage in exclusivist reaction.⁶¹ Their understandings do not assume that syncretism alone resolves problems of inequality and violence, rather they argue that the historical fact of syncretism can be used to harness a self-conscious (and potentially self-critical) type of ethics.

Conclusions and Further Questions

What are the implications of these debates in religious thought for world politics? International theorists such as Jean Bethke Elshtain, Nicholas Rengger, Michael Loriaux, Richard Falk, and William Connolly have begun to break down the Enlightenment barriers to the study of religion by discussing seriously the theological ethics of Augustine, Luther, and others, re-evaluating theological conceptualisations of justice and reconciliation, and calling into question the modernist neglect of religious belief.⁶² Nevertheless, the analysis of religious

MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 10-11 and Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995).

57. Other anthropologists criticise concepts of hybridity and syncretism for presupposing an underlying, 'essential' version of religion. For an excellent overview of this debate, see Charles Stewart, 'Syncretism and Its Synonyms: Reflections on Cultural Mixture', *Diacritics* 29, no. 3 (1999): 40-62.

58. Chung, *The Wisdom of Mothers Knows No Boundaries*, 33.

59. Carlson, 'Crossan's Jesus and Christian Identity', 42.

60. *Ibid.*, 42.

61. Chung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again* and Carlson, , 42.

62. See Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Meditations on Modern Political Thought* (New York: Praeger, 1986); Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1995); Michael Loriaux, 'The Realists and Saint Augustine: Skepticism, Psychology, and Moral Action in International Relations Thought', *International Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (1992): 401-20; Richard Falk, *Explorations at the Edge of Time* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); William

attitudes, ethics, and praxis by students of world politics more generally has been lacking. Even much contemporary 'critical' International Relations remains dominated by Enlightenment worldviews that cast religious belief, thought, and action in overly essentialist terms.

Theological and religious thinking, however, can help to reframe debates on the role of culture in international politics in productive ways. This article has analysed several specific theological views on multiculturalism in world politics, including religious pluralism, apologetics, and syncretism. Each of these perspectives, while differing significantly from the others, challenges the exclusivist views of religion that dominate popular understandings as well as persisting assumptions of International Relations. Each perspective also—like others before them—mirrors historical developments as well as trends in political philosophy.

Theological pluralism, for instance, has many resonances with liberalism, yet probes more deeply into the meaning of alternative systems of belief in ways that ultimately challenge liberalism's Enlightenment presuppositions. Apologetics, on the other hand, is one of many possible dialogical processes that are designed to overcome the problems associated with alterity, though it seeks to do so through a robust defence of belief and identity. Syncretist religious ethics, like much deconstructionist philosophy, points to the contingency and multiplicity of identity. All of these forms of thought encourage students of international politics to understand religion as evolving rather than reified. They also point to the necessity of thinking through the implications of religious and theological perspectives on culture as a means of enriching our understanding of the ethical possibilities apparent in world politics.

The student of international politics, conversely, should not ignore her traditional preoccupation with the problem of power in assessing the value of theological ethics. The debate about the value and legitimacy of syncretism, for example, has taken place largely in a context in which postcolonial religious thinkers are challenging well-organised and well-funded sites of traditional religious power.⁶³ Likewise, it is difficult for either apologetical discourse or pluralist ethics to be enacted in situations exempt from unequal power differentials. Yet to oversimplify any of these trends in religious thought or reduce their possibility to that of power differentials would also be a mistake. Such a path would impose a teleology rather than open our analyses to the contingency and ethical possibilities that these debates make apparent.

Students of international politics should look at the intersection between ethics and praxis in analysing religious contributions to debates about multiculturalism

E. Connolly, *Why I am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); and William E. Connolly, *The Augustinian Imperative: A Reflection on the Politics of Morality* (Newberry Park, CA: Sage, 1993).

63. See, for example, Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) and Talid Asad, 'Modern Power and the Reconfiguration of Religious Traditions', *Stanford Humanities Review* [<http://www.stanford.edu/group/SHR/5-1/text/asad.html>] (2 December 2000).

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rather than understanding belief merely as dogma. In order to accomplish this, we need to explore further the connections between religious and philosophical conceptions of identity and multiculturalism. Moreover, we need to incorporate both the relations of power prevalent in the world and the opportunities opened by differing religious stances when analysing the possibilities of religious ethics. It is thus critical to reincorporate religious understandings of identity, dogma, and praxis into debates about the composition and possibilities of multiculturalism and political community in world politics.

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