

**“WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?”  
RETHINKING THE PARTICULARITY  
OF CHRISTIANITY THROUGH  
THE RELIGIOUS OTHER**

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*A well-ordered love can only give to others the grace of its  
difference.*

Stanislas Breton<sup>1</sup>

After centuries of insisting on the uniqueness of Christianity, and decades apologizing for it, there may be some openness to revisiting the topic in fresh ways. The notion of Christian uniqueness has traditionally focused on the belief in the unique salvific role of Jesus Christ, which itself has been transferred to the Church and its sacraments as the unique means of salvation, and which has inspired generations of selfless missionary dedication to the salvation of others, but also untold suffering caused by religious wars, colonization and the eradication of ancient cultures and traditions. Greater awareness of and openness to other religions mainly since the beginning of the twentieth century has led to serious critical self-reflection, and to rethinking Christian uniqueness in ways captured by the now very familiar paradigms of inclusivism, pluralism, exclusivism and particularism. These paradigms, each with their own internal variation, have more or less exhausted the possibilities for thinking about the uniqueness of Christianity (as of any other religion).

In spite of attempts to offer different names for the various paradigms, to reduce them all to the same, or to shift the discussion from questions of soteriology to epistemology (as I have done),<sup>2</sup> the theological debate on Christian uniqueness has reached a certain stalemate. Though still offering an important framework for situating oneself as a Christian within the reality of religious diversity, it says little about the actual uniqueness or distinctiveness of Christianity, and it offers little by way of

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<sup>1</sup> Stanislas Breton, *Unicité et Monothéisme* (Paris : Editions du Cerf, 1981), 156.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Cornille, “Soteriological Agnosticism and the Future of Theology of Interreligious Dialogue,” in *The Past, Present and Future of Theologies of Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Terrence Merrigan and John Friday (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) 201-215; “Soteriological Agnosticism and Interreligious Dialogue,” in *From Vatican II to Pope Francis: Charting a Catholic Future*, ed. Paul Crowley (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014) 112-126.

contribution to the dialogue between religions. It simply starts from *a priori* religious convictions, pondering how these may be adjusted or modified to allow for the reality and the validity of other religious traditions.

In reaction to traditional claims to uniqueness and exceptionalism, the tendency in pluralist and in post-colonial theology of religions has been to focus on the equivalence and equality of religions or to erase religious borders and distinctions. Advances in the study of religions have indeed drawn attention to the radical diversity within religious traditions, to the fluidity of religious borders and religious identities, and to the impossibility of identifying certain unchanging characteristics that would distinguish religious traditions from one another. In his fractal theory of religious diversity, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, for example, boldly states that “the differences that can be observed at the interreligious level are, to some extent, reflected at the intrareligious level in the internal differences discerned within the major religious traditions, and that they can be broken down at the intrasubjective level into different patterns or structures of the religious mind.”<sup>3</sup> It is undeniable that one finds similar patterns in various religious traditions: similar tensions between apophatic and kataphatic notions of the divine, similar variations of dualistic and non-dualistic notions of the relationship between self and the ultimate reality, similar menstrual taboos, similar qualities of sainthood, similar forms of institutional patriarchy, similar ethical principles, etc. And attention to similarities certainly helps to address the bigotry, fear and antagonism that often colors the relationship between religions. But too much emphasis on similarity tends to reduce religions to a bland and monotone uniformity in which dialogue and mutual exchange itself eventually becomes superfluous. Fruitful dialogue requires awareness and celebration of religious differences and a willingness to advocate for one’s own distinctive perspectives and priorities. “Each tradition,” as Michael Barnes puts it, “has its own difference and particular virtues for living out a similar ‘generosity of spirit’ and commending it to others.”<sup>4</sup>

It is however still risky, and even untoward to raise the question of the uniqueness or the particularity of a religion, especially Christianity. The idea of particularity may still be associated with notions of superiority, arrogance, exceptionalism, and even white supremacy. I myself would probably not have dared to give it much thought, were it not for the fact that I was recently asked to write a short article on my compatriot, Father Damien, who was unanimously voted by the secular Belgian population as the “greatest Belgian ever” (ahead even of the famous cyclist Eddy Merckx). While writing the article, I was asked to reflect on the distinctive Christian nature of Damien’s calling and mission. Though somewhat reluctantly, I came to admit the fact that Damien’s total commitment to the leper colony in Molokai and his eventual martyrdom as a victim himself were profoundly and ineluctably connected to and inspired by his Christian faith and devotion to Jesus Christ and his passion (he was a Passionist priest). His life had also become a source of inspiration to other great figures from other religions such as Mahatma Gandhi.

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<sup>3</sup> Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 233.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Barnes, *Interreligious Learning. Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 119.

This then gradually led me to rethink the question of the uniqueness or the particularity of Christianity, not as an *a priori* given, but as a reality and awareness that might be discovered in and through the dialogue or engagement with other religions. One of the important fruits of an open and honest dialogue between religions, as of any dialogue, is indeed enhanced self-knowledge or awareness of one's own particularity. Dan Madigan has put this eloquently when he states, from the perspective of his dialogue with Islam, that:

The fact that at certain points the parallels limp somewhat or even break down is a salutary reminder precisely of the uniqueness of the Christian proclamation that distinguishes it from its Islamic counterpart. So much of interreligious dialogue tends to be based on the finding of mutual echoes in sacred texts and common ethical teachings. Yet surely one of the great values of our encounter with the other—especially with an other who contests our version of the same tradition—is to discover our particular identity rather than any generic similarity.<sup>5</sup>

Dialogue and comparative theology have tended to focus mainly on what one can learn about and from other religious traditions. But learning may indeed also take the form of rediscovery and reaffirmation of aspects of one's own tradition that come into particular relief in relation to the other, and a repossession of those aspects of one's religious identity. The latter seems particularly pertinent as a combination of religious ignorance and scandal has often made Christians shy or weary to testify to their own tradition. Stanislas Breton, also observes that “in the restlessness that leads to the pilgrimage to the sources of the Orient, ... we detect the malaise of a faith which is uncertain and tired, and which no longer has the strength to differentiate.”<sup>6</sup> Dialogue, however, requires a give and take in which partners discover themselves through dialogue and then return the gift of their particularity to the other. Pope Francis also emphasizes the importance of realizing and assuming one's particularity in dialogue when he states:

I dialogue with my identity but I'm going to listen to what the other person has to say, how I can be enriched by the other, who makes me realize my mistakes and see the contribution I can offer.<sup>7</sup>

In this paper, I wish to propose various ways or avenues in which religious particularity may come to light precisely in relation to the religious other: through spiritual nostalgia, holy envy and religious reaffirmation. These are meant to provide a

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel Madigan, “God's Word to the World. Jesus and the Qur'an, Incarnation and Recitation,” in *Godhead Here in Hiding. Incarnation and the History of Human Suffering*, ed. Terrence Merrigan and Frederik Glorieux (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2011), 166.

<sup>6</sup> Breton, *Unicité et Monothéisme*, 156.

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, “Address to Representatives of Civil Society,” Asuncion, Paraguay (July 11, 2015), [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150711\\_paraguay-societa-civile.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco_20150711_paraguay-societa-civile.html).

framework that may be applied to Christianity, but in fact also to any other religion, as it rediscovers its distinctiveness through other religions. I am here thus proposing a relational approach to Christian uniqueness, one that is as much dependent on the particularity of the specific tradition it engages as it is of Christianity itself. This means that, unlike earlier nineteenth and twentieth century attempts to discover an eternal and unchanging essence of Christianity, the identification of certain particularities will likely be variable and depending on the particularity of the concrete other. I will focus mainly on examples from the engagement with Hinduism, with which I am most familiar. But other contexts will likely uncover other particularities.

### RELIGIOUS HYBRIDITY AND SPIRITUAL NOSTALGIA

Though a common and ancient custom in many parts of the world, especially in Asia, the phenomenon of religious hybridity or multiple religious belonging has only recently garnered scholarly attention in the West.<sup>8</sup> As individuals are more than ever exposed to various religious options, they increasingly combine elements from various religious traditions to form their personal religious identity. This may lead to a refusal or inability to identify with any particular religion, as is the case with those who call themselves “spiritual but not religious.” But it may also lead to a continued identification with more than one religion, usually one’s cradle tradition and one other religion. The study of this phenomenon has mainly focused on Christians and Jews who also identify with Buddhism or Hinduism, and the discussion so far has centered mainly on questions of the possibility, rationality, legitimacy and desirability of identifying with more than one religious tradition.<sup>9</sup>

Here, however, I will focus on the question of why religious hybrids still remain attached to their cradle religion, or what particular elements they would not want to lose or abandon in spite of the appeal of the other religion?

The phenomenon of religious hybridity is complex, with many types and degrees of identification with more than one religion. For some, it is a matter of identifying with the cultural context of one’s home tradition but with the beliefs and practices of another tradition, for others it is a matter of identifying with the core beliefs of one’s home tradition and with the hermeneutical framework of another tradition, and for yet others it is a matter of piecemeal combination of elements of both traditions, with or without much concern for theological or philosophical coherence. Though no single case may thus be seen to be representative or normative, I will offer a few examples of

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<sup>8</sup> One of the first theological studies of this phenomenon was my edited volume *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), republished by Wipf and Stock.

<sup>9</sup> Rose Drew, *Buddhist and Christian? An Exploration of Dual Belonging* (London: Routledge, 2011); Gavin D’Costa and Ross Thompson, *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging: Affirmations, Objections, Explorations* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016); Peniel Jesudason Rajkumar and Joseph Dayam, eds., *Many Yet One? Multiple Religious Belonging* (Ferneby: World Council of Churches, 2016); John Barnett, *Christian and Sikh: A Practical Theology of Multiple Religious Participation* (Durham: Sacristi Press, 2021); Daniel Soars and Nadya Pohran, eds., *Hindu-Christian Dual Belonging* (Abington: Routledge, 2022.)

more famous religious hybrids and what they have come to regard as distinctive of Christianity in relation to Hinduism.<sup>10</sup>

One of the earliest individuals to identify himself as a Hindu-Christian was Brahmanbandhab Upadhyaya (1861-1907). Born to a Hindu Brahmin family, he became familiar with Christianity through his education and involvement in the nineteenth century Hindu reform movement whose founders, Rammohan Roy and Keshab Chandra Sen were deeply inspired by Christianity. For Rammohan Roy, who has been called a “Protestant Hindu,” it was in particular Jesus’ ethics and monotheism that attracted him, and that framed his approach to Hindu reform.<sup>11</sup> And Keshab Chandra Sen was even more deeply shaped by the example and teaching of Jesus Christ as he sought to establish a “Hindu Church of Christ,” the *Church of the New Dispensation* which would combine Christian teachings of self-sacrifice and forgiveness with Hindu cultural elements. He famously stated that “nothing short of self-sacrifice, of which Christ has furnished so bright an example, will regenerate India. ... And the better to stimulate you to a life of self-denial, I hold up to you the cross on which Jesus died.”<sup>12</sup> Unlike these reformers, Upadhyaya himself did convert to Christianity, but without fully renouncing his Hindu identity. Among the things that drew him to Christianity were the comprehensiveness and the universality of the teachings of Jesus. Contrasting this universality with the more ethnic tradition of Hinduism, he stated:

Jesus Christ claims to have given to mankind the completest possible revelation of the nature and character of God, of the most comprehensive ideal of humanity, of the infinite malice of sin and of the only universal way to release from the bondage of evil (avidya). It is for *all* nations, for *all* ages, for *all* climes.<sup>13</sup>

Other elements that convinced Upadhyaya of the validity and truth of Christianity were the examples of what he calls a “superhuman love” which “moves towards objects not because of their having any attraction of their own but because God loves them.” Citing the examples of St. Francis and Father Damien, he asks:

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<sup>10</sup> A more institutionalized or formal version of religious hybridity may be found in so called “interreligious ashrams” or “interreligious centers” where elements from different religions are brought together in a more shared set of beliefs and practices. Here, a community might follow the lead or direction of a particular individual, or else allow for personal choice among various religious offerings or options. Still, such interreligious institutions or settings must also make some selection from the different religious traditions on display. As such, there is some preconception of what any particular religion might contribute to a shared religious practice and experience. While some of those institutions may still have a dominant religious orientation, such as Fireflies ashram near Bangalore, others claim to be fully interreligious, such as the Ajatananda ashram in Rishikesh. Here, one might inquire into what the Christian “ingredient” might be in such interreligious constellation.

<sup>11</sup> M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Hindu Renaissance* (London: SCM, 1969), 8 ff.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Hindu Renaissance*, 57.

<sup>13</sup> Julius Lipner and George Gispert-Sauch, eds., *The Writings of Brahmanbandhab Upadhyay*, Vol II (Bangalore: United Theological College, 2002), 192.

Where—we ask in wonder and amazement—where in the whole history of the world can you find instances of such heroic, supernatural love outside the fold of the Christian and Catholic Church?<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, he also believed that Hinduism contained many noble and valuable ideas and practices and that it was possible to remain culturally a Hindu while religiously a Christian. In the end, he thus embraced most Christian teachings and practices while rejecting the Western garb in which Christianity was introduced in India.

The phenomenon of Hindu-Christian dual belonging or religious hybridity has come to often be associated with the figures of Henri Le Saux (Abhishiktananda) (1910-1973), Bede Griffiths (1906-1993), and Raimon Panikkar (1918-2010), who are all recognized as pioneers of the inculturation of Christianity in India and Hindu-Christian dialogue. Each of them was deeply steeped in the Christian tradition as monks and/or priests, but came to be personally transformed through their experience of living in India and immersing themselves in Indian spirituality, particularly in the tradition of Advaita Vedanta. Panikkar's journey in the world of religious hybridity is captured in his winged words: "I 'left' as a christian, I 'found' myself a hindu, and I 'return' a buddhist, without having ceased to be a christian."<sup>15</sup> Much of their reflection and commentary has focused on the possibility of interpreting or re-interpreting Christianity through the non-dual philosophical categories of Advaita Vedanta. Such exercise tends to diminish or even erase religious particularities in light of the undifferentiated understanding of ultimate reality. However, each of them also held on to elements of distinctiveness of Christianity which they believed to be of enduring value and which could also represent a contribution to Hinduism. For Abhishiktananda, the particularity of Christianity lies in its communal aspects and in its emphasis on love as the essence of the divine reality:

Christianity is the revelation that Being is Love (cf. 1 Cor 13:2, 1 Jn 4:16).<sup>16</sup>

The mystery of the Holy trinity reveals that Being is essentially a koinonia of love; it is communion, a reciprocal call to be; it is being-together, being-with, co-esse; its essence is a coming-from and going-to, a giving and receiving.<sup>17</sup>

The Church is essentially agape (love) and koinonia (being-with, being-together). She is the sign and sacrament of the divine koinonia

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<sup>14</sup> Lipner and Gispert-Sauch, eds., *The Writings of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay*, Vol II, 24-26.

<sup>15</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 42.

<sup>16</sup> Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience* (London: ISPCK, 1994), 136.

<sup>17</sup> Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda*, p. 135.

of Being. By her very nature she is communion in love and her function in mankind is to produce a ferment of love.<sup>18</sup>

Bede Griffiths similarly suggested that what distinguishes the Christian understanding is that “[b]eing is not only consciousness, but also love, that there is relationship at the heart of reality.”<sup>19</sup> In his book, *The Marriage of East and West*, he also points to the importance of history and to the possibility of social and historical change as important Christian principles that should be preserved and that might complement what Hinduism could bring to the marriage. For Raimon Panikkar, for whom dialogue with another religion always “takes place in the depth of the person” and “in which one struggles with the angel, the daimon, and oneself,”<sup>20</sup> the encounter with Hinduism and Buddhism mainly resulted in a creative reinterpretation of scripture and of classical theological ideas. However, he also recognized and affirmed that what distinguishes Christianity—and what other religions might take from it—is its belief in the alterity of the divine reality and in the radical dependency of humans on divine providence and grace:

The central Christian concern is a timely reminder to Buddhism and to all the humanisms that no amount of self-effort and goodwill suffices to handle the human predicament adequately; we must remain constantly open to unexpected and unforeseeable eruptions of Reality itself, which Christians may want to call God or divine Providence. Christianity stands for the unselfish and authentic defense of the primordial rights of Reality, of which we are not the masters.<sup>21</sup>

In a similar vein, Le Saux comments that “in the Christian’s acceptance of his limitations and his involvement in time there is a depth of love and surrender which is beyond the understanding of the Stoic or the Vedantin.”<sup>22</sup>

It is clear that the experiences of Hindu-Christian religious hybridity do not end up identifying a single or common set of elements as distinctive of Christianity. Though the theme of love seems to be a constant, the themes of providence, history, universality, sacrifice also appear, depending on what particular Hindu beliefs or practices are foregrounded and how the contrast is drawn. What is evident is that through the deep identification with another religious tradition, certain elements suddenly stand out, and acquire a new importance, first of all for oneself and one’s own religious life, but also possibly beyond that, as religious hybrids may be regarded as the microcosmic personification of dialogue on a broader scale.

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<sup>18</sup> Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda*, p. 137.

<sup>19</sup> Bede Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishing, 1982), 35.

<sup>20</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1999) xvii.

<sup>21</sup> Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 131.

<sup>22</sup> Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda*, 145.

### HOLY ENVY OR SPIRITUAL REGRET OF RELIGIOUS OTHERS

Another way to discover and embrace one's religious particularity is through the eyes of the other. In the encounter between religions, members of other religious traditions often come to notice distinctive elements that believers themselves take for granted, or that are so familiar and part of an integrated system that one is oblivious to their particularity. To be sure, there will be many elements of particularity that will leave the religious other indifferent, amused or even contemptuous. But there may also be elements that become the source of genuine admiration. This may then evoke what Krister Stendahl has called "holy envy"<sup>23</sup> or Willis Yaeger "spiritual regret." It refers to teachings or practices in another religious tradition one wish were part of one's own tradition.

While the institution of the Church and Western Christianity were often the object of critique and even disdain on the part of Hindu reformers, most of them were deeply moved and inspired by the life and teachings of Jesus, who was regarded as the greatest ethical model and teacher in the history of religions. Though refusing to convert to a religion that was associated with Western imperialism, Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884) had a particular appreciation for Jesus' teachings of forgiveness and self-sacrifice, which were "so utterly opposed to the wisdom of the world, and so far exalted above its highest conceptions of rectitude."

The most famous Hindu to engage Christianity in depth is undoubtedly Mahatma (Mohandas) Gandhi. His experience of Christianity was filled with ambiguity. In his youth, he had an aversion for meat-eating and alcohol-drinking Christians.<sup>24</sup> But after arriving in England, Gandhi's perception of Christianity changed through his friendships with Christians and through reading the Bible. He states that the Sermon on the Mount "went straight to my heart," in particular the words "but I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man take away thy coat let him have thy cloke [sic] too."<sup>25</sup> The cross became for Gandhi a symbol of nonviolence and voluntary suffering, as reflected in the following statement:

Though I cannot claim to be a Christian in the sectarian sense, the example of Jesus' suffering is a factor in the composition of my underlying faith in non-violence, which rules all my actions, worldly

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<sup>23</sup> He introduced this expression at the occasion of the inauguration of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints. In response to the opposition to this, he proposed his three principles of interfaith understanding, one of which is that one should always be willing to recognize elements in the other religion that one admires and that one wish could be incorporated in one's own religious tradition. The two other elements are "not to compare the best in one's own religion with the worst in the other" and "to seek understanding of the other religion by asking its adherents and not its enemies." For a further use of the term, see Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others* (New York: Harper, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Stories of My Experiments with Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 33-34.

<sup>25</sup> Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 68.

and temporal. Jesus lived and died in vain if he did not teach us to regulate the whole of life by the eternal law of love.<sup>26</sup>

The centrality of self-sacrificing love was thus for Gandhi the distinctive element in the experience and teaching of Jesus. Though he did not accept the Christian belief in the meaning of the cross as atonement,<sup>27</sup> it did represent for him an example to follow. In addition to the “eternal law of love,” Gandhi also singled out the radical forgiveness taught and exemplified by Jesus as a particular element of appeal:

Jesus Christ prayed to God from the Cross to forgive those who had crucified him. It is my constant prayer to God that He may give me the strength to intercede even for my assassin. And it should be your prayer too that your faithful servant may be given the strength to forgive.<sup>28</sup>

While Gandhi thus admired these elements in the life and teaching of Jesus, he saw no reason to convert to Christianity. He believed that each religion contained within itself resources for attaining the highest end of salvation or liberation, and that the policies of conversion had more to do with institutional power than with spiritual development.

A general aversion to conversion combined with the development of a more nationalist and defensive orientation in Hinduism seems to have muted the inclination of Hindu thinkers to engage Christianity in positive and constructive ways, or to pay attention to the particularity of Christianity. A notable exception to this is the Hindu scholar Anantanand Rambachan, who is one of the foremost contemporary thinkers within the tradition of non-duality, *Advaita Vedanta*. In his early encounter with Christianity, it was in particular the Christian emphasis on justice that caught his attention.

Like Gandhi, he was also drawn by the Cross as a source of inspiration. While Hinduism has many divine manifestations, he acknowledges that none project the image of the divine “executed in pain and humiliation.” The image of Jesus on the Cross is for him not only an example of non-violence (*ahimsa*), but of the depth of God’s love that has no limits. The fact that this love expresses itself in a preferential option for the poor became for him the inspiration for developing his own Hindu theology of liberation, an example of Hindu-Christian comparative theology done from a Hindu perspective. Inspired by Mt 25:31-46, which he states is his “favorite Christian text,” and by Catholic social teaching, he has attempted to find resources in the Hindu tradition that would affirm the dignity of every human being and that would combat problems of patriarchy, homophobia, casteism, anthropocentrism, and childism.<sup>29</sup>

It is clear that non-Christian perceptions of what is distinctive and admirable about Christianity are shaped by one’s own particular location and familiarity with

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<sup>26</sup> From a conversation on the train to Bardoli, 1939, quoted in Gandhi, “The Jews and Zionism.”

<sup>27</sup> Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 124.

<sup>28</sup> M.K. Gandhi, “Advice to Muslims,” October 26, 1947. Quoted in William Emielsen, ed., *Gandhi’s Bible* (London: ISPCK, 2009), 123.

<sup>29</sup> Anantanand Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015).

Christianity. What seems to stand out from a Hindu perspective, is the emphasis on self-sacrificing love, forgiveness, and the care for the marginalized and the poor.

### REAFFIRMATION IN CONTEXTUAL AND COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

While seeing oneself through the eyes of the other may bring home certain elements of religious particularity, deep immersion in the religious life and experience of the other may also raise awareness of distinctive elements of one's own religion. This may occur through the missionary practice of inculturation, through interreligious dialogue, or through comparative theological engagement with another religion. Though inculturation is often seen as the rebirth of Christian faith in and from local cultures, it also involves active and constructive engagement with the religion or religions that have traditionally shaped that culture. Comparative theology on the other hand, involves deep theological engagement with the teachings and practices of another religion. In both cases, such engagement brings to light not only what one may learn from the other religion, but also what may be distinctive or unique about one's own religion, what one might be able to contribute to the other culture and tradition, or what one may feel called to reaffirm as a particularly valuable element in one's own faith and practice.<sup>30</sup> With regard to the discernment of the particularity of Christ and of Christianity, Indian Christian theologians have also made important contributions. The Indian Jesuit Michael Amaladoss makes the point that:

The Word's incarnate manifestation in Jesus has a special role in the historical process. But it cannot be declared *a priori*, but discovered in and through other manifestations of the Word. This gives an important role to the Asian Churches because all of the world's religions have their origin in Asia. We have therefore a privileged task that we cannot renounce, because God has called us to it.<sup>31</sup>

An Indian Christian theologian who has embraced this task is the often overlooked Jesuit George Soares-Prabhu (1929-1995). Though primarily a biblical scholar, he also immersed himself deeply in the study of Indian traditions, and he sought to develop a Hindu hermeneutics of Christian scriptures.

He distances himself from the way in which the uniqueness of Jesus and of Christianity had been discussed in Western academic theology:

The problem of the uniqueness of Christ as discussed in theology today seems to me an academic problem with little significance (for no one doubts that salvation exists outside the Christian community, and whether or not it is through "Christ" operating in some

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<sup>30</sup> In my *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell), 137-142, I discuss at greater length "reaffirmation" as one of the types of learning in comparative theology.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Amaladoss, *Asian Theology for the Future* (Seoul: CAPS, 2012), 30-31.

mysterious way, does not really seem to matter), and of much presumption (for it presumes to know the mind of God).<sup>32</sup>

Soares-Prabhu rejects any attempts to establish the superiority of one religion over the other as “neither practical nor wise” and celebrates the diversity of “forms of religiosity as abundantly as the flowers in a forest.”<sup>33</sup> However, in most of his writings, he does reflect on the distinctiveness of Christianity, especially in relation to Hinduism and Buddhism. In this, he focuses mainly on the experience and on the teachings of Jesus. He argues that Jesus’ experience of God as unconditional love was “absolutely unique,”<sup>34</sup> pointing in particular to the parent-child relationship, on the elements of intimacy, dependency, vulnerability, and mutual love and trust as characteristic of the Christian experience of God. He is quick to admit that this does not mean that Christianity has a rich set of teachings on prayer, and that compared with Hinduism or Buddhism “prayer techniques are poorly developed in Christianity.”<sup>35</sup> However, he states that “what Jesus gives us is a new attitude in prayer, emerging out of a new experience of God.”<sup>36</sup> Prayer is “an interpersonal ‘conversation’ with God, in which love is experienced and given, and relations of intimacy founded.”<sup>37</sup>

Even more important with regard to Christian particularity is for him Jesus’ insistence on the inseparability of love of God and love of neighbor:

It is just this intimate pairing of the love of God and the love of neighbor that constituted the specificity and the uniqueness of the teaching of Jesus. Interhuman concern is obviously an element in all religious traditions. The liberated Buddha sends his disciples out on a mission ‘for the profit of many, out of compassion for the world, for the bliss of many, for the welfare, the profit, the bliss of Gods and humankind. (Mahavagga I 10:31) ... But the interhuman concern here is always a secondary attitude which follows from a prior religious experience (liberation) or a primary commitment to God (the Covenant). It is only with Jesus that the ethical attitude becomes, as it were, an integral part of the religious experience itself, for to experience God as ‘Father’ is to experience the neighbor as

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<sup>32</sup> George Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, ed. Francis D’Sa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 96.

<sup>33</sup> Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 96.

<sup>34</sup> Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 88.

<sup>35</sup> Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 210. He adds that “Even the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, one of the more technical treatises on prayer in the Christian tradition, would appear curiously unfinished to an Indian reader, accustomed to the meticulous instructions on diet, posture, breathing, and methods of concentration that are detailed in Indian texts on meditation” (p. 218). Abhishiktananda similarly states that “In the Gospel Jesus gave no teaching to his disciples either about methods of meditation, dhyana, or about systems of yoga. He simply commanded them to love one another.” In Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda*, 200.

<sup>36</sup> Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 210.

<sup>37</sup> Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 210.

‘brother.’ The horizontal is thus inseparably welded into the vertical, and love of neighbor is brought onto a level with love of God.<sup>38</sup>

Soares-Prabhu believes that this represents or should represent the distinctive Christian way of being in the world. “Like the Buddhist attitude of ‘mindfulness,’ the Christian attitude of agape is thus an existential attitude derived from a change in one’s being.”<sup>39</sup> This love is to focus in particular on the poor, the vulnerable and the marginalized,<sup>40</sup> and is to include one’s enemies, as reflected in Jesus’ table fellowship with sinners and outcasts.<sup>41</sup> Soares-Prabhu states that the command of loving one’s enemies “is not a uniquely Christian demand, as is sometimes suggested.”<sup>42</sup> But for him, “there is something particularly impressive in Jesus’ command that we love our enemies” insofar as it calls for “not just the resolution of personal antagonisms within the group, but for the acceptance of members of alien and hostile groups as well.”<sup>43</sup>

This high moral bar relates to another element of Christian particularity, its understanding of sin. Soares-Prabhu states that “Jesus has so radicalized the norms of right conduct (love) that all claims to sinlessness are effectively foreclosed.”<sup>44</sup> This also connects with the distinctive Christian teaching of forgiveness. In summary, he comments that:

The Indian reader would at once identify active concern and forgiveness as the two poles, positive and negative, of the Dharma of Jesus—of that complex blend of worldview and values, of beliefs and prescriptions which ‘hold together’ the followers of Jesus and integrates them into a recognizable community. For if these are not exclusively Christian attitudes, the importance given to them in the

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<sup>38</sup> Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 198.

<sup>39</sup> Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 92. He elsewhere puts this in more contrasting terms when he states “For Jesus, the ultimate goal is not unconditional freedom (as in Hinduism and Buddhism) but unconditional love” (170).

<sup>40</sup> Soares-Prabhu is thus particularly distressed about the fact that caste discrimination continues to exist in Christian communities in India and states that “the fact that Christian *Dalits* do exist (and suffer) among us is a sign of how little Christian we are, and of how much we stand in a state of serious and, one suspects, unrepentant sin. Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 130.

<sup>41</sup> Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 117. Soares-Prabhu also refers to the Jewish scholar Geza Vermes who mentions this as distinctive of Jesus’ life.

<sup>42</sup> Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 198. He states that “it probably features in some form or other in all religions and is certainly strikingly conspicuous in Buddhism. . . . Indeed the “love command” for Buddhism (and Hinduism) is in a sense more comprehensive than that of the Christians, for it reaches out to all sentient beings and not to humankind alone. Christianity with its curious insensitivity to non-human life—its tolerance of bull-fighting and blood sports, of the ruthless hunting down of animals for fun, and the reckless extermination of while species of living things for ‘profit,’ has a lot to learn from the Hindu-Buddhist tradition of reverence for life.”

<sup>43</sup> Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 199.

<sup>44</sup> Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 225.

teaching of Jesus and the concrete forms they assume in the New Testament give them a specifically Christian significance.<sup>45</sup>

In lifting up what may be unique to Christianity, Soares-Prabhu does not deny that there is much to learn from other traditions, even on how to live out the particularity of Christianity. For example, the attitude of forgiveness requires “the cultivation of a non-judgmental attitude toward self and others” which has been developed in particular in Buddhism, and from which Christians might learn.<sup>46</sup>

In the end, for Soares-Prabhu, the uniqueness or distinctiveness of Christianity is not to be argued in theoretical or doctrinal terms, but is to be shown through a particular way of being in the world, as he states that “[t]he true ‘uniqueness’ of Christ is the uniqueness of the way of solidarity and struggle (a way that is neither male nor female) that Jesus showed as the way to life. That uniqueness cannot be argued but must be lived.”<sup>47</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The theological question of the particularity or uniqueness of any tradition may be addressed or answered in various ways. It may be approached on the basis of the internal theological claims of a tradition, or it may be approached more phenomenologically and inductively, through engagement and dialogue with other religions. Here, we have explored how the particularity of Christianity may reveal itself through various forms of dialogue or engagement with Hinduism: through the experience and insights of individuals who are drawn to another religion but remain inspired by certain aspects of their home tradition, through the admiring gaze of other religions, and through the renewed self-awareness of individuals who are immersed in other cultures and religious traditions. Each of these approaches may of course be applied to reflection on the particularity of any religious tradition. The particularity discovered through this approach is always in relation to and thus also dependent on a concrete other, and is thus not to be regarded as timeless and universal, or as the essence of a particular religion. The elements of particularity that surface in relation to Hinduism, or to particular strands of Hinduism, are thus likely to differ from those that surface in relation to other strands, and to other traditions.

Religious particularity is both the fruit of dialogue and as a contribution to dialogue.

A new understanding of Christian particularity through the engagement with Hinduism has surfaced a number of themes: the emphasis on the ultimate reality as love, the inseparability of love of God and love of neighbor, in particular the poor and the marginalized, the call to self-sacrifice, the idea of sin, but especially of forgiveness,

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<sup>45</sup> Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 220.

<sup>46</sup> “The way to self-forgiveness that would empower us to forgive others is the cultivation of a non-judgmental attitude toward ourselves and others. . . This will be particularly appreciated by the Indian reader, because in his tradition too non-judgmental awareness is the beginning (and the end) of wisdom and the heart of all forgiveness.” Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 224-225.

<sup>47</sup> Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 97.

the notion of dependency on divine providence and grace. Any of these themes may be more or less emphasized, depending on the individual and the partner in dialogue. But they shed light on what Christians may bring to the dialogue with Hinduism, not as an exclusive claim, but as a particular contribution to the common good. Through repossessing and more consciously cultivating their own particularity, Christians may then return the gift of their distinctiveness to the other.

In his celebrated book, *The Dignity of Difference*, Jonathan Sachs calls on religions to respect the particularity of religions, and allow each its own integrity and autonomy.<sup>48</sup> This is an important message insofar as religious difference and particularity has often tended to be regarded as a threat to other religions and subject to erasure, especially by dominant and numerically powerful religions. The idea of respecting and affirming religious difference thus represents an important appeal. But the particularity or distinctiveness of religions may also represent an occasion for religions to learn from one another and to grow. Though it is certainly up to each tradition to determine what it might learn from other religions, the difference or distinctiveness of each religion may be regarded as not only a cherished possession but also as a possible gift or contribution.

This attention to the particularity of Christianity may be controversial. It may be regarded as an attempt to rescue or reinstate the superiority of Christianity, or even to prove it through concrete evidence, as only the more noble or enviable aspects of Christian particularity are foregrounded. However, the idea of relational particularity has various safeguards against traditional claims to superiority and exceptionalism. First, the relational understanding of particularity precludes any blanket or generalizing claims to superiority. While one may take some pride in the fact that certain elements of one's own tradition are regarded as admirable or valuable in relation to a particular other, they may not stand out in the same way in relation to other others. Secondly, but related to the previous point, the notion of particularity does not imply its exclusivity. While certain beliefs or practices may come into particularly sharp focus in relation to another tradition, they may not be absent or unimportant in that tradition. As religions develop through history, certain elements may come to be more explicitly emphasized or developed at the expense of others. Dialogue may then lead to a recovery or a reinvigoration of those elements in the other tradition. Thirdly, the particularity of one's own tradition naturally suggests the particularity of the religious other, and the fact that the other may also have much to offer to the dialogue and to one's own tradition. The very notion of particularity may indeed suggest some limitation, or emphasis on certain elements at the expense of other important teachings or values. The idea of relational particularity thus acknowledges a complementarity of religions, at the very least as historical realities and in the public square. In approaching Christian uniqueness or particularity not as a theological and religious given, but as a reality discovered in and through the dialogue with other religions, Christians may both attain greater humility while simultaneously assuming greater self-awareness and efficacy in the dialogue itself.

This relational, inductive and dialogical approach to the particularity of Christianity is not meant to supplant or replace the traditional theological discourse on

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<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Sachs, *The Dignity of Difference. How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. London: Bloomsbury, 2003.

Christian uniqueness. The discourses of theological uniqueness and relational particularity, though not unconnected (insofar as the elements of particularity are based on the example and teachings of Jesus, who is believed to be the unique savior) operate on different registers. Each of the approaches has its importance and limitations. The belief in the unique and universal salvific role of Jesus Christ and of the Church remains a core matter of faith for all Christians, while it has relatively little importance for the religious other or for concrete interreligious life and collaboration (except insofar as certain theologies may inhibit collaboration and dialogue). And while the idea of the relational particularity of Christianity is relevant for other religions, it has less bearing on questions of ultimate truth and salvation. The results of the relational approach to Christian particularity do not imply its exclusivity. A believer may of course use the data from the relational approach to the distinctiveness of Christianity in apologetic terms to bolster or confirm their faith position. But this again offers little by way of actual contribution to the dialogue with other religions.

What matters for religious others, and for the common good, involves those elements of particularity or singularity that exercise a more universal religious and ethical appeal. Interreligious dialogue serves not only to become aware of what these particular religious elements are, but also to repossess them in a way that they become more effective in serving the religious other and the common good. Since religious faith and practice encompasses a complex whole of teachings which cannot all be assumed or embodied with the same intensity or passion, dialogue with the other may allow us to pay particular attention to, cultivate and embody those teachings and practices which make a genuine difference.