

INTERRELIGIOUS LIVING: A PERSONALISTIC AND SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

SIMONMARY ASESE AIHIOKHAI

Introduction

The discussion among Christian theologians concerning the relationship between Christianity and other religions in the world, especially since the Second Vatican Council, has yielded both positive and negative results. The discussion has been spearheaded by mainly Euro-American theologians and scholars. Interestingly, these discussions have been shaped by many ideological approaches. One has been the assumption of arguing for the legitimate right of existence of all religions because all religions are attempts by their adherents to situate themselves epistemologically in the world. Another approach has been for Christian theologians to argue within their tradition for grounds to uphold some religious claims of other religions, and by this process argue for the right of existence of these other religions, while at the same time upholding the Christian right to missiology. There have also been attempts to uphold the right of the Christian claim to being the only true, complete, and final religion revealed by the Triune God to humanity.¹ These approaches have recognized and accepted the sociological reality of religious hybridity operative in societies comprised of multiple religions, or are reacting against this reality. Rather than focus on or begin the conversation for or against religious multiplicities from the sociological reality, they have kept the discussion, for the most part, on the level of theological propositional claims.

In this paper, I want to situate the discussion within the context of daily-lived experience and encounters among members of different religions. Instead of continuing

the discussion by arguing for or against the right of other religions' existence through the propounding of propositional truths, I will present the complex reality mainly from a sociological / personalistic context. To better understand other religions and argue for their right to exist or not to exist, theologians ought to begin by studying contemporary women and men living in communities comprised of multiple religious affiliations. They should observe how these men and women navigate in and out of these religious traditions, while at the same time living out their own different faith traditions. Rather than interreligious dialogue, focus should be on interreligious living. Dialogue, for the most part, has been construed to be some intellectual enterprise separate from praxis. To avoid this, there needs to be a shift toward interreligious living, which begins by attesting to the fact that interreligious exchange and recognition are already happening prior to any mental attempt to understand the reality at hand.

Methodologically, I will situate the discussion within the contributions made by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, John Hick, and Langdon Gilkey. My contributions to the current discussion on multiple religions and their claim to be affirmed or not will be shaped by the writings of Homi Bhabha, Chinua Achebe, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and Paul Ricoeur. Most importantly, current sociological findings concerning societies and religious identities will be the nexus upon which this discussion will be based.

Recapturing the thoughts of the fathers of the Second Vatican Council

The conciliar document, *Nostra Aetate*, has been one of the most influential documents, among catholic and non-catholic theologians sympathetic to catholic magisterial teachings, shaping the discussion on interreligious dialogue. It is important to

re-examine this document and note the lacuna, if any, within it that has spearheaded the apparent false understanding of the sociological reality present in contemporary society.

The council fathers, while reflecting on the human condition, argue that humans generally seek answers to what faces them through their respective religions.² However, there is a sense of unadulterated mono-religious identity presumed by the conciliar fathers. They fail to address the reality of multiple religious affiliations and syncretized religious identities that have become a major factor shaping religious affiliations in the age of globalization. This omission has major consequences. It has given birth to an attempt to encounter other religions mainly from propositional postulations. Should the fathers have recognized these other factors present in society, the current discussions among scholars and theologians interested in interreligious dialogue would have been more practical and proceeded from a critical study of the human condition.

The observations noted by the council fathers in *Gaudium et Spes* in relation to the on-going changes in human society do not reflect the reality of syncretic religious identities. While attention is given to the amity between the church and culture, and how each has shaped the other, there is total silence on the shaping of the religious truths and their understanding by adherents of the various religions.³ The understanding of a faith tradition is always in relation to other faith traditions. The Hebraic understanding of its community as contained in the Hebrew Bible is shaped by its response to its polytheistic neighbors. The heart of its understanding of Yahweh, as the only true God who is not material, is conditioned by its evaluation of other humanistic deities worshipped by its neighbors. This same trend shaped the Christian understanding. For Christians, they are the People of the New Covenant. Both *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate* allude to this

understanding of the church's identity.⁴ But this identity is not created in a vacuum. The identity of the church is in relation to the Hebraic identity as the People of God. As articulated by the council fathers, the theological concept of New People of God shows the continuity and yet culmination of the Hebraic covenantal identity.

However, in evaluating the current situation of the church, which necessitated the convocation of the Second Vatican Council by Blessed John XXIII, the defining of the church by the council fathers ought to have reflected the encounters between Christianity and all other religions, not simply denouncing the antagonistic relations that have shaped the encounters for centuries past. The council fathers ought to have articulated the interreligious shaping of doctrinal formulations, understandings, and praxis among the different religions, and particularly for Catholics, over the centuries of interreligious interactions. This missing link has been brought about by the false understanding that the Catholic Church has held/taught unadulterated doctrines over the past two millennia. Catholicism is not a religion contained solely in the laboratory. It is a religion lived out by women and men in societies and communities of multiple religions. The hierarchical structures of the church, its liturgical praxis, canonical procedures, and liturgical calendar have all been shaped by external religious and secular trends.⁵

Rather than focus on interreligious dialogue that has mainly been shaped by the Euro-American sensitivity to other religions and a presupposition of naiveté on their part with regard to other religions, I prefer we focus more on interreligious living. European and Euro-American Christian theologians will have to accept the fact that Christianity is the youngest partner in many of the societies and cultures of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and South America. Christians in these territories are not so much concerned about

dialoguing with non-Christians because they are already engaged with them. They are on the level of interreligious living. Interreligious living is conditioned by the non-optional reality of multiple religiosities in a culture. The missiological adventure of Islamic and Christian missionaries into these societies and the presence of indigenous religions have necessitated the need for interreligious living. On the other hand, interreligious dialogue is based on a false assumption of the constitution of society. Mono-religious societies with no contact with other multiple religious societies are fast disappearing due to the reality of religious, economic, political, and ideological globalization. One does not engage in a dialogue from a distance or with an un-encountered other. Encountering the other is already interreligious living. It is within interreligious living that interreligious dialogue should spring forth and not the other way around. Before substantiating on the reality of interreligious living, let me first present the arguments of some Christian theologians.

Current trends in interreligious dialogue

In his book *Truth and Tolerance*, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger argues for interreligious encounter as a way forward. He argues that such an encounter ought not to lead to the subsuming of one religion by another or an encounter that settles for pluralism. Rather than pluralism, he argues for religious plurality. For him, pluralism is the isolated existence of multiple religions with no engagement with the other. Plurality is rooted in encounter.⁶ For Ratzinger, interreligious dialogue ought not to proceed from the pedestal of relativism. In his critique of Paul Knitter and John Hick's relativistic views of religions and their claims, Ratzinger argues that interreligious dialogue from a relativistic

perspective prefers "orthopraxy to orthodoxy."⁷ There is a rejection of metaphysical truths and a clinging to simplified and yet radical notions of liberation theology.⁸ The linking of interreligious dialogue to liberation theology presents Christianity, either as an oppressive system in need of purgation or as a tool for radical political change in society. In either case, the Christian claim to knowledge of divine truths is repudiated by the relativistic position since Christianity is being forced to renounce all forms of truths that will be regarded as offensive to the other religions.⁹

Joseph Ratzinger favors the argument of disparity among religions. Just as religions have and can be used negatively, some religions, by their nature, are negative and cannot lead to the good of humanity.¹⁰ In this sense, the notion of relativism is detrimental to the freedom to express itself by each religious tradition.

Ratzinger, while appropriating Karl Rahner's reference to adherents of other religions as "anonymous Christians" argues that it is a legitimate position for Christians to judge other religions as precursors to Christianity. This argument is based on the idea that within a religious tradition, there ought to be the freedom for self-definition that is always relative to other religions. In other words, a religion has the freedom to define itself at the expense of another religion.¹¹ He argues that two conclusions can come out of this approach; the first has already been mentioned, where other religions are viewed by Christians as Christianity's precursors. The other conclusion has to do with the view of recognizing other religions as deficient.¹² This view plays itself out in the Catholic understanding of Jesus as the definitive and complete source of revelation and salvation. For Muslims, the Prophet Mohammed is the final prophetic witness of Allah.¹³

Ratzinger fails to answer the question, how are religious adherents of one religion to react to the universalistic claims of another religion when such claims threaten their very existence? It is true that Ratzinger deplores the evils perpetrated by different religions in human history. But in the contemporary era, how is society to mitigate the tensions that may arise from universalistic claims by one religious tradition? This is what shapes the reflections of Hick and Knitter. I must point out that I am neither advocating for religious relativism nor for religious universalism.

The difficulty that shrouds Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's reflection on the place of Christianity in the midst of world religions is that he fails to recognize the fact that Christianity is already condemned to engaging other religions. He states in *Truth and Tolerance* that the Christian rejection of the gods of other religions in the history of Christianity, though it can be viewed by contemporary women and men as arrogance, is a Christian identity-marker, which proceeds from the conviction of belief in Christ as the definitive source of Trinitarian Truth. Then he goes on at length to expound on the relationship between faith and culture. He calls attention to the fact that "faith is cultural."¹⁴ He also calls attention to the dynamic nature of culture that continues to grow through interaction with other cultures.¹⁵ If one is to accept these conclusions of Ratzinger, then one will have to conclude that Christianity is not static. It is nourished and malnourished by its constant interactions with other religions. Such interactions are not always superficial; rather, they touch on the fundamentals of the credal belief of Christianity. This is what faces contemporary Christians and non-Christians alike. Karl Rahner puts it succinctly when he writes:

Every religion which exists in the world is...a question posed, and a possibility offered, to every person. And just as one experiences someone else's culture in practice as something relative to one's own and as something existentially demanding, so it is also involuntarily with alien religions...and we experience them therefore as something which puts the absolute claim of our own Christian faith into question.¹⁶

The failure to touch upon the on-going interactions between Christianity and other religions, and how these interactions continue to shape the Christian self-understanding, is either a major oversight on the part of Ratzinger or is consistent with the universalistic view of Christianity that sees all other religions as deficient and in need of Christian insights.

John Hick, in his article “Whatever Path Men Choose is Mine”, calls attention to the fact that future discussion on interreligious dialogue ought to move from mere rhetoric to actual concrete observations of the place of Christianity in the global community. Quoting the *Encyclopedia Britannica* of 1978, he reminds Western Christians that Christians are in the minority within the global population. This fact calls for a critical self-study, he argues.¹⁷ As a critique of Christian universalistic claims, Hick calls attention to the reality of people naturally being raised as members of the religion to which their parents belong. This, he argues, is the case in societies that are predominantly aligned to a particular religion. He points out the implications of immigration taking place today, where immigrants from other cultures with different religious affiliations are moving to Europe and wanting to continue their religious observations.¹⁸ This reality is

not just one that makes Christians rethink who they are in relation to other religions, as Hick would argue, but it is a wake up call for theologians of all religions to begin observing the dynamics at play in interreligious interactions brought about by this reality.

Reacting to Rahner's notion of "anonymous Christian," Hick calls attention to the pervading influence of the dogmatic notion that "outside the Church there is no salvation" as shaping the attitude of Christian inclusivists.¹⁹ Rather than advocate this position, Hick calls for a pluralism that is both relativistic and universalistic. It is relativistic because the means of religious identity, rooted in worship, are relative to each other. No religion's worship rituals and theological propositions are superior to the other. It is universalistic because all the ends of the different religions are the same. Hence, he states, "And yet there is an important sense in which what is being done in the several forms of worship is essentially the same."²⁰

John Hick argues that the failure of Christianity to liberate humanity for the past two millennia from the vices of domination and exploitation of the marginalized robs Christianity of its claim to superiority in relation to other religions.²¹ Substantiating this with historical facts, Hick calls attention to the role European Christian ideologues and missionaries played in establishing imperial rule over Africa, Asia, South America, Oceania, and the Natives of North America in conjunction with the European secular powers. By bringing up this point, Hick tries to show the intricate link between religion and secular culture. This historical evidence, Hick argues, discredits the Christian claim to a religion that transcends the mundane sphere.²²

Hick argues that a sociological study of each religion and their appreciation of holy women and men points to the fact that all religions have the same significance.

Saints attain the level of "self –giving love for others." This is the case in Christianity, Islam, and even Hinduism.²³ Such a pervading reality amongst all religions, argues Hick, robs Christianity of its claim to superiority.

In *An Interpretation of Religion*, Hick devotes a good part of the work to arguing for the notion that human persons are able to have "direct mystical experiences."²⁴ This aspect of cognition, he distinguishes from "experience-as." The latter type of cognition, he argues, is always contextual. This is what shapes the ostentatious aspect of cultures and religions. The former aspect of cognition is what makes all religions the same since adherents of each religion can attain knowledge of the divine.²⁵ This postulation makes the Christian claim to possessing the fullness of salvific truths, for Hick, superfluous.

While Hick's observations warrant the need for sober reflection by leaders of religious traditions that have contributed in one way or the other to perpetuating and establishing oppressive structures in the communities they have evangelized or occupied, his interest fails to address the concrete reality at hand. The reality that concerns religious women and men is not primarily finding arguments for letting the other be. Multiple religiosity is already a given. Christians, Jews, Muslims, and other native religionists are already engaging each other. The fact is that interreligious living is already happening. Articulating theological propositions to show the non-universalistic nature of Christianity or any religion is a misplacement of energy. Focus ought to be on a sociological study of how adherents of different religions are navigating in and out of their religious affiliations as they relate with members of other religions.

Langdon Gilkey calls attention to the current interest in religious pluralism by arguing that the surge in interest is motivated by both theological and cultural motives.

Culturally, Gilkey situates the greater interest in pluralism in the collapse of European imperialism brought about by the Second World War. The consequence of winning the war against Germany and its allies necessitated European imperialistic countries to grant independence to its colonies. To foster good relations with the newly independent colonies that had been looted and governed forcefully, a new strategy had to be adopted, one that called for equality of cultures – consequently, equality of the religions within these cultures.²⁶ It is unfortunate that Gilkey would hold such a simplistic position as to what necessitates the cause of pluralism. While there are aspects of truth in his analysis, the need for religious tolerance, upon which pluralism seems to build its case, is not a case rooted in the power shift from Europe to non-European civilizations. The billions of religious women and men who, on a daily basis, engage each other do not encounter one another with the intent to have power over the other. Could this approach of Gilkey be a voice refusing to relinquish a position of exclusivism rooted in the ideology of power and domination?

Focusing on the theological motive for religious pluralism, Gilkey argues that "pluralism as parity of religions has done more harm to the Christian self-understanding". This is because of the attempt by contemporary religious pluralists to do away with old Christian modes of expression and adopt new modes that are in themselves vague and porous. The adoption of religious parity harms the core understanding of Christian truths about Jesus Christ himself as the self-revelation of the Trinity and the finality of God's encounter with humanity.²⁷

Relativism, Gilkey argues, makes it impossible for each religious tradition to seriously engage and challenge another to be more prophetic in the attainment of their

ends.²⁸ But the question ought to be asked, does relativism necessarily equate to the dilemma Gilkey is raising? It does not seem so. A religious tradition can be on an equal pedestal with another religion while at the same time being a prophetic voice for the other. Are humans not constantly being prophetic witnesses towards each other, without in any way presuming a moral or racial superiority?

On another note, Gilkey argues that the notion of Hick's universalistic and relativistic understanding of religions, where each religion is a partial attempt to articulate one ultimate reality, leads to syncretism.²⁹ It is important to engage Gilkey on this point. Syncretism, as he would want to argue against it, is not always a negative phenomenon. In fact, no religion can escape from it, insofar as its adherents are constantly engaging followers of other religions. The preservation of the Christian faith in Japan after the expulsion of the Jesuit missionaries for more than two centuries is a clear example of how syncretism can be the foundation for the preservation of the Christian faith. Also, in West Africa, the preservation of the Christian faith in the Kingdom of Benin by the people after the Portuguese Augustinian missionaries left the kingdom in the sixteenth century until the arrival of the SMA missionaries in the nineteenth century is a candid example of the preservation of the Christian faith in a syncretic atmosphere. Today, in many parts of Africa, where multiple religious identities are rampant, many Christians hold on to syncretic belief-systems which embrace and foster a salubrious approach to the human condition as well as to society.

Gilkey posits that not all religions have legitimacy of existence. Some religions that are demonic, he argues, and cannot be of parity with Christianity. However convenient this argument may be, Gilkey ought to be reminded that terming a religion

demonic or not is relative to the one making the value judgment. Just as Christianity may declare a religion demonic because it goes against the core understanding of itself, another religion can also make such a value judgment against Christianity.

Gilkey, like Hick and Ratzinger, fails to recognize some of the concrete issues facing religious women and men. Gilkey's negative portrayal of syncretism or religious hybridity points to the fact that he is more interested in defending the Christian exclusivistic cause solely on the level of theological propositions. He does this when he writes; "...we [Christians] must ourselves stand somewhere. That is, we must assert some sort of ultimate values...in this case the values of persons and of their rights, and correspondingly, the value of the free, just, and equal community so deeply threatened by this theocratic tyranny."³⁰ While it is logical for any religion to uphold its arguments for its relevance in society, it is also important for theologians of any religion to study how its members are constantly defining themselves in light of their interactions with followers of other religions.

The statistics below help to buttress the point that adherents of the different religions still find faith relevant to their lives. The argument that other religions either have outlived their relevance or do not have real positive contributions to human society has no numeric basis. The growing conversion rates in these non-Christian religions ought to make Christian theologians to ask the foundational question, what makes these religions viable?

Religions and global statistics³¹

Annual change	Annual Change, 1990-2000				2000		2025		2050		Countries
	Natural	Conversion	Total	Rate	Adherents	%	Adherents	%	Adherents	%	
Christian	22,708,799	2,501,396	25,210,195	1.36	1,999,563,838	33.0	2,616,670,052	33.4	3,051,564,342	34.3	238
Muslim	21,723,118	865,558	22,588,676	2.13	1,188,242,789	19.6	1,784,875,653	22.8	2,229,281,610	25.0	204
Hindu	13,194,111	-660,377	12,533,734	1.69	811,336,265	13.4	1,049,230,740	13.4	1,175,297,850	13.2	114
Buddhist	3,530,918	156,609	3,687,527	1.09	359,981,757	5.9	418,344,730	5.3	424,607,060	4.8	126
Jew	194,962	-70,447	124,515	0.91	14,434,039	0.2	16,053,350	0.2	16,694,500	0.2	134
Other religions	4,352,324	-1,319,302	3,194,518	5.57	247,806,670	4.1	305,521,080	3.9	342,309,180	3.8	218
No Religion	28,353,920	-31,963,512	-3,609,592	-0.22	1,629,374,957	26.9	1,845,405,668	23.6	1,806,052,390	20.3	238

Based on the statistics above, the whole discussion on exclusivistic claims and/or inclusivist pluralism has to be put in context. Observing the different religions above and the number of adherents, one is drawn to the conclusion that many factors account for this phenomenon. If religious pluralism is detrimental to religious vigor as Ratzinger and Gilkey would want to argue, how do they account for these numbers? Or are they going to argue that these numbers amount to inauthentic believers? On the other hand, is Hick going to argue that all of these religions and the millions of adherents that convert to them result solely from either ignorance, for believing that the religions are unique in themselves, or that they all operate with the understanding that all of these religions are modal expressions of the same reality? I do not think so.

It is important to show what is happening within each continent with regard to conversions to Islam and Christianity. As noted above, the voices for religious pluralism, inclusivism, and exclusivism have mainly been those of the European and American continents. However, when one looks at the statistics below, one cannot but observe that

these two continents have the least number of religious diversities and conversions. Could it be that their theological propositions are necessitated either by a false awareness of what it means to be engaged in interreligious living, or is their concern a subconscious resistance to the reality of religious globalization?

Below are the statistics of Muslim and Christian adherents and converts in each continent³²:

Africa	Annual change, 1990-2000				2000		2025		
Religion	Natural	Conversion	Total	Rate	Adherents	%	Adherents	%	Countries
Christians	7,934,453	438,975	8,373,428	2.68	360,232,182	45	633,803,970	48.8	60
Muslims	6,500,295	130,471	6,630,767	2.37	282,641,990	40.6	519,347,830	40.0	58

Asia	Annual change, 1990-2000				2000		2025		
Religion	Natural	Conversion	Total	Rate	Adherents	%	Adherents	%	Countries
Christians	4,046,396	2,365,720	6,412,116	2.32	312,849,430	8.5	464,800,100	9.8	50
Muslims	15,156,918	463,200	15,620,118	2.10	832,878,936	22.5	1,219,867,230	25.7	50

Europe	Annual change, 1990-2000				2000		2025		
Religion	Natural	Conversion	Total	Rate	Adherents	%	Adherents	%	Countries
Christians	606,981	315,389	922,370	.17	559,642,545	76.8	554,586,470	79	48
Muslims	6,035	229,994	236,029	.78	31,566,311	4.3	36,004,880	5.1	44

Latin America	Annual change, 1990-2000				2000		2025		
Religion	Natural	Conversion	Total	Rate	Adherents	%	Adherents	%	Countries
Christian	7,426,256	-250,598	7,175,658	1.63	481,102,373	92.7	641,115,950	92.0	46
Muslim	20,296	9,572	29,868	1.99	1,672,011	.3	2,638,130	.4	40

North America	Annual change, 1990-2000				2000		2025		
Religion	Natural	Conversion	Total	Rate	Adherents	%	Adherents	%	Countries
Christians	2,354,524	-337,930	2,016,594	.81	260,624,388	84.2	290,345,170	79.9	5
Muslims	37,040	26,929	63,969	1.56	4,449,696	1.4	6,520,040	1.8	3

Oceania	Annual change, 1990-2000				2000		2025		
Religion	Natural	Conversion	Total	Rate	Adherents	%	Adherents	%	Countries
Christians	340,036	-30,117	309,919	1.33	25,109,520	82.6	32,010,392	80.7	28
Muslims	2,790	5,012	7,802	3.04	301,292	1.0	497,233	1.3	8

Some factors influencing religious conversion and identification

No one factor makes people to adopt a particular religion; rather, there are many. The factors can range from economic, psychological, moral, sociological, pathological,

and religious.³³ It would be a hasty conclusion, as has been the case among many Christian leaders and scholars, to hold that some of these factors do not evoke authentic conversion.³⁴ The reality is that conversion occurs on a daily basis. In my experience as a child of a convert and having worked in areas of first evangelization for more than fifteen years, I can attest to the above claim. Faced with difficult situations, a person seeks meaning or reasons to explain her or his condition. When the tools that she or he has have failed to address the situation, most often, conversion to a particular religious tradition or appropriation of aspects of some other religion(s) occurs.³⁵

In the African situation, Chinua Achebe calls attention to this reality in his literary work, *Things Fall Apart*. The fictional character *Okonkwo*, the symbol of resistance to the European presence in his village, is disappointed to find that his own people are not so resistant to the "whiteman's" influence on their culture. The majority of the people of *Umuofia*, "while regarding the new religion as lunacy," are ready to tolerate it, convert to it, and/or send their children to be raised as Christians in the Christian communities within the village because of the economic benefits this has brought to their community.³⁶ To address those who would be quick to argue against the authenticity of such conversions, let me ask the question; is it not part of Christianity's claim to better the human condition both in this world and in the next? If this is the case, then the missionary strategy of alleviating poverty, which is aimed at evoking conversion, cannot be dismissed out-rightly. The link between evangelization and the social condition of the hearers of the Gospel message is stressed by Pope Paul VI in one of his revolutionary Apostolic Exhortations, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. He writes:

...evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of man's concrete life, both personal and social. This is why evangelization involves an explicit message, adapted to the different situations constantly being realized, about the rights and duties of every human being, about family life without which personal growth and development is hardly possible, about life in society, about international life, peace, justice and development- a message especially energetic today about liberation.³⁷

The scenario described by Achebe is the historical reality facing most of the colonized territories in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Oceania, and parts of North America. Conversion has not always come about through freedom of choice. It has sometimes been achieved through coercion.³⁸ This is not solely the guilt of Christianity; Islam has a share in this history as well.³⁹

Psychologists and cultural and religious anthropologists will agree with the claim that no one ever completely leaves behind her/his past when one either migrates to a new culture or adopts a new religion. It is this fact that necessitates a shift in the discussions on interreligious dialogue. From the statistics above, in the different continents, conversions are occurring every day, people are being born into the different religions, and these people are constantly relating with each other. The relationship is not limited to social, political, economic, or cultural levels. It is also on the level of religion.

The multiple interactions among the different religions have created different religious self-understandings among their adherents. Without trying to argue for just one approach to engaging the other, the contributions and observations of Homi Bhabha are

pertinent to articulating some of the dynamics involved in interreligious living. The interactions between peoples and cultures of different continents initiated by the slave trade, industrial revolution, religious pilgrimages, explorations, imperialism, colonialism, economic and political globalization, voluntary or forced immigrations, and technology have created what Bhabha calls the interstitial space or hybridity of existence.⁴⁰ Religious affiliation is no longer simply pure and shaped by the doctrines of only that particular religion. This does not mean that there are no people still upholding solely the Christian or Muslim religious truth in an unadulterated manner, but these seem to be in the minority.⁴¹

In non-Christian societies, where Christianity is the newest religion, the need for religious hybridity has become the reality, especially due to the role Christianity played in shaping the contemporary history of these societies. The relationship of convenience between the Christian and secular foreign rulers has created a Christianity deeply shaped by the multiple religious past of the new converts. In some instances, such hybridity has created a false sense of Christian transformation; the Rwandan genocide is a clear example. A country that was boasted to be the pride of Belgian catholicity and the "new catholic daughter" of the Church forgot its Christian connections when the mayhem began that sent more than half a million Tutsis and Hutus to their graves. Perpetrators of these genocidal acts were Christians, and some were even prominent leaders within their Christian communities. While in the sight of the Belgian Catholic missionaries, the Catholic faith implanted in these cultures was symbolic of a resurgence of the faith in Africa, the actual reality was a hybridized Catholicity that only helped to heighten and quicken the ethnic tensions among the peoples of these Rwanda.

Hybridity is a way of living. In many parts of Africa, the adaptations of the Christian along with the Muslim faiths in the context of the cultural worldview of the people have led to a new vigor in the native expressions of both faiths. Such vigor has defined the boundaries of most of African Christianity and Islam. In the churches, Africans dance and sing in the traditional way, symbolic of their native encounter with their ethnic religious worship prior to the coming of Christianity. This mode of worship is neither purely Christian (as handed to them by the missionaries; the Irish missionaries' evangelization and worship style in Nigeria is a good example – their dedicated adherence to stoic posture in worship is no longer the reality in Nigeria's contemporary Christian worship), nor is it a total return to the traditional ways. It is a marrying of two religious realities. For the African, she/he is a Christian. She/he is also a faithful continuum of her/his ancestral past.

Religious hybridity going on today in all societies, where adherents of different religions are constantly re-defining themselves through their interactions, transcends the traditional notions of inculturation. The traditional understanding of inculturation, where the religion is said to transform the culture without reciprocity, is a false understanding. Here, it is not culture interacting with a religion. Rather, it is cultures and religions interacting simultaneously.⁴²

Gilkey's concern about the relationship between Christianity and culture can be used to address another aspect of the issue at hand. He calls attention to the point that early Christianity, while adopting the symbolic trends in culture, was reluctant to accept the religious symbols within culture since Christianity had its own symbols.⁴³ While this point is well taken, it is appropriate to state that no religion ever limits itself to particular

symbols. While certain symbols may be central to a religion, it is the nature of religion to adopt more symbols wherever they may be found if they best represent the religion in its new context.

The notion of pluralism criticized by Ratzinger, where each religion is said to be impenetrable by outsiders and cannot be evaluated, is also addressed by Paul Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another*. Ricoeur reminds Western epistemologists that the Cartesian isolated and insulated *cogito* is a false perception. The *cogito* is always in relational existence with the other. This is made possible because of the initial disposition within the *cogito* to be in relational encounter. Hence, the other is already in the *cogito* as a possibility that makes the encounter possible.⁴⁴ Applying this to interreligious interactions and symbolic appropriations as mentioned by Gilkey, one could argue that what is central to all religions, making it possible for them to constantly interact and nourish or hamper the growth of each other, are humans themselves. Religion cannot be materialized without adherents. Since it is within human nature to be relational and be engaged with the other as a menace that cannot be done away with, interreligious living is a healthy phenomenon. If one is to appropriate Ricoeur's thesis, it follows then that interreligious living is always a means for religious transformation. Consequently, pure exclusivistic claims of religions or religious purity may be fast becoming a reality shrouded in the glorified era of *in illo tempore*.

If relationality and/or proximity are the human conditions, from which no one can flee, then Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas' call to authentic and ethical encounters based on truthfulness ought to be the guiding principles of interreligious living.⁴⁵ Rather than focus on the propounding or repetition of theological treatises buttressing their

religious positions, theologians and scholars should be more interested in studying how their fellow religionists engage others on an existential rather than on an epistemic level.

Interreligious dialogue should be a dialogue of living and not of intellectualism. It is in living witness that true witnessing occurs. The ability to navigate the complexities brought about by religious and cultural diversities, and yet be truthful to one's religious beliefs, is what authentic religious living entails. For a Christian to be there for a Hindu to the point of death, for the sake of defending the right to worship for the marginalized Hindu, evokes the Levinasian ethical response by one for the helpless other.⁴⁶

Levinas' contribution to ethics serves as a critique of such positions that blur the lines that make each religion unique.⁴⁷ While, as I have argued above, hybridity seems to be the pervading force in human history today, it does not lead to the complete eradication of the distinctness of each particular religion. The hybridized African Christian identifies herself or himself as Christian because she/he adheres to those symbols or some fundamental symbols that define Christianity. Her/his continuous affiliations with the native religious heritages do not eradicate the Christian marker that she/he has come to make personal.⁴⁸ However, unlike Levinas' impenetrable *other*, each religion is both penetrable and impenetrable.⁴⁹ Certain aspects of each religion are open to changes and certain aspects continue to hold. Examples abound in each religion. In Christianity, belief in a triune God and in Jesus as the Son of God is definitive. In Islam, belief in Mohammed being the final prophetic witness of Allah is definitive. While these may be definitive epistemologically and in a creedal way, their articulation in worship and in the daily living of their adherents is another matter. For some Christians, Jesus' divine sonship can best be articulated through the appropriation of their knowledge of

their traditional heritages or their previous faith affiliations. This gift of syncretism or hybridity makes possible the assimilation or appropriation of previously considered epistemologically incompatible religious symbols to form holistic religious symbolisms that make a religion relevant in contemporary societies.⁵⁰

Conclusion

I began this paper by calling attention to the need to broaden the methodology surrounding interreligious dialogue. Focus ought to be given to the matter of interreligious living. The study of sociological dynamics playing out in the contact among members of the different religions ought to be the focus for those interested in articulating how religious people are living out their specific religions. Not to start from there is to presume a false reality of the situation at hand and engage in an encounter of the mind without an encounter of the body.

In pointing out a different path for interreligious discourse, I do not deny the contributions made by many theologians who have made it their lifelong venture to make sense of the complex and sometimes paradoxical human religiosities. In fact, the contribution of this paper will not be possible if not for the theological speculations of these luminaries to the discourse. However, to continue to navigate the discourse from the same theological locus will only lead to the same conclusions, which, repeatedly, have failed to address the complexities of human religious identities. One cannot make sense of interreligious living without affirming the fact that paradoxical existence is part of the human condition. From a sociological point of view, it is quite logical to argue that even in a puritanistic adherence to a particular religious tradition, at the core of such

adherence lies the resilience of diversity. A religious tradition never falls from the sky, it is always an offspring of a parent religion or a reaction to other religions. In shaping its tenets, it is always held captive by the tenets and practices inherent in the other religions with which it was pre-existed.

It is my candid view, as reflected in the corpus of this paper, that theologians engaged in inter-religious dialogue must transcend temptations to explain out rightly the interplay of adherence to either a religious tradition or to multiple religious traditions by providing simplistic explanations. Rather, to affirm the complexity of the issue is to give credence to the innate paradox that encapsulates the entire sphere of human existence. Unfortunately, this temptation to attain linear explanations for religions and their content continues to plague western epistemological ventures. God has always been understood by the west as the apogee of simplicity while complexity is viewed as imperfect, forgetting that every religion, even while attempting to present a coherent tenet, always reflects complexities that are sometimes paradoxical. Perhaps the time has come to abandon the epistemic heritage of the West and embrace the notion of complexity as the medium for understanding religion and the human condition.

In conclusion, the approach to interreligious dialogue that both holds there to be three options for assessing the religious *Other* and argues for one of the three positions – pluralism, inclusivism, exclusivism—is called into question by the existence of persons and entire continents of persons who instantiate multiple religious identities. Developed by Eurocentric Westerners for use in “developed” and mostly Christian nations with supposedly static religious identities, the threefold typology fails to speak out of and to the experience of indigenous and colonized people. Western scholars and theologians are

still dancing to the same tune, oblivious to the fact that their supposed partners have—by virtue of their very being—changed the music. To ignore the existence of pluriform religious identities is to once again reinscribe our exclusivist impulse. In this case, we write out the persons whose beings we simply fail to acknowledge, let alone attempt to understand.

SimonMary A. Aihokhai Ph.D. (Candidate) is studying Catholic Systematic Theology in Duquesne University. His areas of interest include religion and economic development in developing countries; religion and ecology; religion and identity; and theology, phenomenology, and culture. He has an extensive background in first evangelization in Nigeria and he is involved in Muslim-Christian dialogue.

Email: aihokh9160@duq.edu

¹ Eugene Hillman, C.S.Sp., *Many Paths: A Catholic Approach to Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 4.

² *Nostra Aetate*, para. 1 (All conciliar documents are cited from Flannery, Austin O.P. (editor), *The Basic Sixteen Documents: Vatican Council II. Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations. A Completely Revised Translation in Inclusive Language*. Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1996).

³ *Gaudium et Spes*, para. 57.

⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, 9; *Nostra Aetate*, para. 4.

⁵ Richard W. Rousseau, S.J., "Introduction" *Interreligious Dialogue* Vol. One. Edited by Richard W. Rousseau, S.J. (Ridge Row Press, 1981), pp. ivv.

⁶ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*. Translated by Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), pp. 8384.

⁷ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, pp. 123, 126.

⁸ The critique against the priority of orthopraxis over orthodoxy by Ratzinger is unfounded. The notion of grand narratives handed down from one generation to the other in an unadulterated way is nothing but a myth. A critical study of the growth of doctrinal expression by the church shows that context plays a

great role in this process. To deny context, which is the basis for the argument for orthopraxis, is to deny the reality of the lived experiences of humanity in general.

- ⁹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, p. 119.
- ¹⁰ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, pp. 203204.
- ¹¹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, pp. 1617.
- ¹² Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, p. 19.
- ¹³ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, pp. 8485.
- ¹⁴ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, p. 67.
- ¹⁵ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, p. 81.
- ¹⁶ Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the Other Non-Christian Religions" in *Christianity and Other Religions. Selected Readings*. Edited by John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp.5455.
- ¹⁷ John Hick, "Whatever Path Men Choose is Mine" in *Christianity and Other Religions*, pp. 171-172.
- ¹⁸ John Hick, "Whatever Path Men Choose is Mine" In *Christianity and Other Religions*, p. 173.
- ¹⁹ John Hick, "Whatever Path Men Choose is Mine" in *Christianity and Other Religions*, p. 179.
- ²⁰ John Hick, "Whatever Path Men Choose is Mine" in *Christianity and Other Religions*, p. 174.
- ²¹ John Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity" in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*. Edited by John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), p. 17.
- ²² John Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," pp. 1820.
- ²³ John Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," p. 23.
- ²⁴ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the transcendent*. Second Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 165.
- ²⁵ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 167.
- ²⁶ Langdon Gilkey, "Plurality and Its Theological Implications" in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, p. 40.

²⁷ Langdon Gilkey, "Plurality and its Theological Implications" in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, p. 41.

²⁸ Langdon Gilkey, "Plurality and Its Theological Implications" in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, p. 43.

²⁹ Langdon Gilkey, "Plurality and Its Theological Implications" in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, pp. 43-44.

³⁰ Langdon Gilkey, "Plurality and Its Theological Implications" in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, p. 45.

³¹ David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson (editors), *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in The Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 4; see also, <http://www.bible.ca/global-religion-statistics-world-christian-encyclopedia.htm> (accessed March 6, 2009).

³² David B. Barrett, pp. 1315; see also, <http://www.bible.ca/global-religion-statistics-world-christian-encyclopedia.htm> (accessed March 6, 2009).

³³ The religious conversions in Sweden during the state controlled and enforced religious observances is a good example. See Eva M. Hamberg and Thorleif Pettersson, "The Religious Market: Denominational Competition and Religious Participation in Contemporary Sweden" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Sep., 1994), pp. 205-216, at p. 208.

³⁴ Without denying the significance of John Hick's contribution to finding a universal theory of religious experience, I disagree with the notion that one theory can account for all the factors that necessitate religious experiences and conversion. See John Hick, *God has Many Names* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), pp. 79-87.

³⁵ A good example of syncretism is the case of some conservative evangelical Christians who happen to have homosexual feelings. The Good News Christian denomination has become a means of reconciling these two ideologically opposed ethical positions. Many gay conservative Christians are drawn to this denomination when the crisis of faith sets in and as they attempt to make sense of their feelings and their rational religious convictions. See Scott Thumma, "Negotiating a Religious Identity: The Case of the Gay Evangelical" *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 52, No. 4, (Winter, 1991), pp. 337-339.

-
- ³⁶ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), pp. 178182.
- ³⁷ Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (December 8, 1975), #29 in http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html (accessed November 12, 2010).
- ³⁸ Winston Davis, "Japanese Religious Affiliations: Motives and Obligations" *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Summer, 1983), pp. 131146, at pp. 137138.
- ³⁹ See Rollin Armour, Sr., *Islam, Christianity, And The West: A Troubled History* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002).
- ⁴⁰ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp.19, 169.
- ⁴¹ For a detailed study of multiple religious conversions and belongings within the Christian faith, see Wade Clark Roof, "Multiple Religious Switching: A Research Note" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Dec., 1989), pp. 530535.
- ⁴² For a detailed treatment on this topic see Juliene G. Lipson, "Jews for Jesus: An Illustration of Syncretism" *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (Apr., 1980), pp. 101110; J. D. Y. Peel, "Syncretism and Religious Change" *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Jan., 1968), pp. 121141.
- ⁴³ Langdon Gilkey, *Society and the Sacred: Toward A Theology Of Culture In Decline* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp. 147148.
- ⁴⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 3.
- ⁴⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*. A new translation, with a prologue and notes by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 58; Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes To Mind*. Translated by Bettina Bergo (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 9; Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1981), p. 46.
- ⁴⁶ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity. Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 57.

⁴⁷ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay On Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1969), pp. 3540.

⁴⁸ See John Hick, "The Next Step beyond Dialogue" in *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration*. Edited by Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), p. 6.

⁴⁹ Richard A. Cohen, "Introduction" in Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1987), pp. 1819.

⁵⁰ Anita M. Leopold and Jeppe S. Jensen (editors), *Syncretism In Religion: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 92. A detailed account of syncretism in early Christianity in the Roman Empire and present day Christianity in India helps to substantiate the importance of syncretism. See W. D. Schermerhorn, "Syncretism in the Early Christian Period and in Present-Day India" *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 5 (Sep., 1924) pp. 464-478.