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# From either/or to yin/yang: the hyphenation of Christianity

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**KEY WORDS:** Mutual fulfilment theology, hyphenated religion, post-colonialism, dual belonging, religious bilingualism.

## Explanation

In Graham Greene's novel *A Burnt-out Case*, a newcomer to the African scene is surprised to find a dying Christian convert with a witchdoctor's potion by his side, but the worldly-wise mission doctor retorts, 'If I sign a form I call myself a Catholic too. So does he. I believe in nothing most of the time. He half believes in Christ and half believes in Nzambi. There's not much difference between us as far as Catholicism is concerned.'<sup>1</sup> We must surely agree that there are syncretistic tendencies within each one of us. We all have sub-personalities which remain unshriven and we trust that God's work of conversion continues within us. But something new is happening in some quarters of mission thinking, not only is hyphenated religion recognised as a fact but the kind exemplified by the dying African may also be commended and promoted by some Christian thinkers.

The roots of this paradigm shift are found in the postcolonial discourse of hybridity. The older approach dealt in dualisms – the colonial powers sought to 'convert' and eradicate ignorant cultures while some individuals and movements within those cultures sought to fight back and retain their cultural integrity. Hybridity was then seen negatively as a watering down, rather as syncretism has been viewed in mission thinking. But a very different attitude prevails today. Important intellectuals, like the Indian postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha who writes of the 'Third Space of Enunciation',<sup>2</sup> stress the creative synergy of interacting cultures resulting in an exciting hybrid – the cultural equivalent of the language Creole. Hyphenated culture is seen as a positive development.

Parallel developments in religious thinking are leading some worried Christians to warn not of the Westernisation of the global Church but the Easternisation of the Western Church. After all, hyphenated religion is commonplace in Korea, Vietnam, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, not to mention among the Chinese who are happily Confucian-Taoist-Buddhists and the Japanese who have Shinto rites of passage for the newborn, Christian weddings and Buddhist funerals! Indeed it would be seen as culturally corrosive for a Japanese person to insist on one

1 G. Greene, *The Collected Edition* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 362.

2 H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 37.

exclusive religion. This may surprise us perhaps, but closer to home the shift to yin/yang (both/and) theology can sound positively shocking. Here is the notorious testimony of the Christian theologian, Raimundo Panikkar for instance, 'I "left" as a Christian, "found myself" a Hindu, and "returned" as a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian.'<sup>3</sup> Journeys into dual belonging have also been made by such eminent Christian thinkers as Bede Griffiths, William Johnston, and Thomas Merton and what they have in common is that they have apparently done so not from positions of doubt and frustration but from a deep security in their Christian faith.

What has made this pilgrimage theologically possible is the shift, marked for example in the teachings of Vatican II, from an exclusivistic replacement model where the Spirit is only to be found at work in the Church, to an inclusivistic fulfilment model where the Spirit calls the Church to be the Kingdom shop-window for what the Christ is seeking to inspire everywhere. The *missio dei* is neither independent of the Church nor completely dependent upon it. Or to put it another way, it is the change from seeing the Spirit as a gift to the Church to the view that the Church is a gift to the Spirit. Needless to say, both theological approaches insist that Jesus Christ is the unique incarnation of God and the saviour of the world whose teaching remains normative as the criterion by which to judge the truth claims of other religions. But the further step, which the pilgrims cited above have made, is to take a *mutual*-fulfilment position whereby the Christian admits that, as well as having a gospel to share, he too may have something to learn from his non-Christian friend's theology and way of life so long as it does not jeopardise his basic Christian convictions about the centrality of Jesus and his allegiance to the Christ.

Most of the well known hyphenated Christians have lived in foreign countries, usually as missionaries, and have engaged in profound inter-religious dialogue. M. Forward argues that the opposite of monologue is, in fact, not dialogue but di-logue or even due-logue which is a combative situation where one participant wins and the other cedes (or seethes!). But true communication, according to him, involves genuine dia-logue where participants push *dia* (= through [Greek]) to a mutually deeper understanding and wisdom. 'Real dialogue is about them and us becoming we – we asking together: what does Transcendence want of her human children?'<sup>4</sup> R. Panikkar would agree and calls not just for inter-religious but also intra-religious dialogue. In other words, one needs so to empathetically enter the worldview of the other that the interaction becomes internalised. One becomes religiously bilingual. Or as A. Pieris argues, the goal of dialogue is neither syncretism nor synthesis but symbiosis.<sup>5</sup> P. Phan points out (following J. Fredericks) that this is only possible if we extend our *agape* love to

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3 R. Panikkar, *The Intra-religious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 2.

4 M. Forward, *Inter-religious Dialogue* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 87.

5 A. Pieris, *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 154-61.

include *philia* (friendship), for the former is unconditional and indiscriminate while the latter is particular and based on mutual interest and respect.<sup>6</sup>

So far it might be assumed that religious hyphenation is only occurring amongst the theological elite but the 'Easternisation of religion' phenomenon is much more widespread and is the result of globalisation with migrations of people and ideas from everywhere to everywhere, of individualism where people refuse to give exclusive loyalty to any one creed or tradition and postmodern pragmatism which has given up on supreme metanarratives in favour of what seems to work in different contexts. This can result in the infamous pick 'n mix approach of New Age. Further, some through inter-marriage across religions may gain a deep empathy with the worldview of their spouse, and indeed their children may well feel a 'dual belonging' and experience 'religious bilingualism' (interestingly Panikkar's mother was a Spanish Catholic and his father was an Indian Hindu). Others who have experienced conversion from another faith to Christianity may, in time, want to re-visit that faith concluding that God had not been totally absent from it as they had first assumed (or were so taught by their Christian discipler). They too are on the way to hyphenation.

For some, however, it seems to be simply an element of the prevailing *Zeitgeist*. Take the famous contemporary English composer, John Tavener (1945-) for example. After a hippyish period in his twenties, he became a devout member of the Eastern Orthodox Church at the age of thirty and thereafter only wrote spiritual music that remained firmly within that tradition (perhaps his most famous piece being 'The Protecting Veil' [1989]). But then in 2001 he felt constrained to begin interspersing his Christian texts with those of other religious traditions, including Hinduism, Sufism and Judaism, and pieces like the seven hour vigil, 'The Veil of the Temple', and also 'Lament for Jerusalem' and 'The Beautiful Names' were born. This last which features the Muslim names for Allah and was commissioned by the Prince of Wales, resulted in Catholic demonstrations outside London's Westminster Cathedral where it was first performed in June, 2007. Following a long tradition that goes back to Justin Martyr, Tavener explained his new focus by claiming that 'there is a misconception of what the revelation of the logos is. For Christians it was Christ. But the logos has revealed itself in other ways to other people.'<sup>7</sup> The likes of Irish Carmelite nuns who find meaning in Buddhist meditative practices and Swiss Reformed retreat centres that employ circle dances and tree-hugging as a means of reconnecting with nature and their pre-Christian ancestry would probably agree with this.

Enough of generalities. Let us look at a specific example – the hyphenation of Christianity and Buddhism. In a paper entitled *Religious Choice is not Exclusive* the Methodist local preacher and lecturer in Buddhism, Elizabeth Harris testifies to dual belonging: 'I can feel equally at home in a Christian church and a Buddhist shrine room. Buddhist vocabulary interleaves and challenges my experi-

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6 P. Phan, 'Multiple Religious Belonging', *Theological Studies* 64 (2006), 24.

7 In J. Bakewell (ed.), *Belief* (London: Duckworth, 2005), 203.

ence of Christianity'.<sup>8</sup> As a Christian she claims to have been enriched by the pragmatic approach to spiritual growth and awareness that is so subtly explored within Buddhism as well as its trenchant analysis of craving as the root of human suffering. Ninian Smart, the Scottish Episcopalian, is more boldly outspoken.<sup>9</sup> He argues that the Augustinian interpretation of the Adam and Eve story as involving a cosmic fall which has so dominated Western Christian theology cannot be sustained in the light of evolution which is a process that results in vulnerable, insecure, ignorant, selfishly competitive creatures rather than ones whose prime problem is a defective will. He feels that this chimes better with the Buddhist diagnoses of suffering as due to greed, envy and delusion rather than the traditional Christian one of culpable evil intent. We are immature needing to grow up and wake up rather than fallen god-like beings. Thus, he claims, Buddhist anthropology and psychology have enriched his Christian theism.

It should be noted that neither Harris nor Smart would give equal weight to the two religions since both are declared Christians. If we applied hyphenation to them they would most certainly be Buddhist-Christians rather than Christian-Buddhists although, of course, there are examples of the latter phenomenon such as the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh who, as a Zen master, became enamoured with what he calls 'the beauty of Jesus' teachings'.<sup>10</sup> The hyphenated Christian will see Christianity as the source of her theology but the other religious tradition as an invaluable resource, not *vice versa*.

### Assessment

First, some clarification as to the terms of the debate. Some may feel that it is a re-run of the older exclusivist/inclusivist discussion but this is not strictly so. Although it is certainly possible to hold the position of the replacement exclusivist, maintaining that one must put one's trust explicitly in Jesus Christ in order to be saved and also agreeing with the Barthians that non-Christians and their cultures are effectively immune from the influence of General Revelation, nevertheless one might equally take a fulfilment exclusivist position by contending that God is working within other cultures and religions but not salvifically. It is quite possible, therefore, to be an exclusivist while refusing to write off other religions as essentially demonic or merely human products. On the other hand, the inclusivist who maintains the possibility of salvation amongst the unevangelised may either insist that this would be in spite of their religion/culture (replacement) or mediated through their religion/culture (fulfilment). The debate which is the subject of this article therefore cuts across the exclusivist/inclusivist divide.

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8 E. Harris, 'Religious Choice is not Exclusive' in M. Forward (ed.), *Ultimate Visions* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1995), 121.

9 N. Smart, 'An Ultimate Vision' in M. Forward (ed.), *Ultimate Visions* 261.

10 T. N. Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (London: Rider, 1995), 5.

Leaving aside, then, the issue of salvation as such, we can first note that thanks to seminal missiological texts like D. Bosch's *Transforming Mission*,<sup>11</sup> the idea of the *missio dei*, whereby God is envisaged as positively influencing the cultures of the world beyond the confines of Church activity, has been accepted by most evangelicals. Popular books like *Eternity in their Hearts*<sup>12</sup> have established that the missionary should investigate to see what God has already been showing the culture to which she is sent. The task is to bring to fulfilment what has already been revealed by the Holy Spirit about God and his ways. What is more, we have become deeply embarrassed by aspects of mission history where replacement driven mission sought to replace the indigenous culture with a Christian one which was, in fact, wedded to all kinds of colonial assumptions. Surely it is time to reclaim the helpful patristic notion of conversion as 'illumination' (*photismos*) whereby the Holy Spirit shines his pure beam into the individual's worldview to banish unholy shadows and spotlight that which is noble and pure.<sup>13</sup>

So far so good. But the idea of mutual-fulfilment and the consequent possibility of hyphenation may seem to many to be an heretical deviation and merely a trendy fad. However, let us note that there are clear precedents both in Scripture and also in Church history.

In fact there is nothing new in the phenomenon of Christians finding enrichment in the worldviews of other cultures. We find it in Scripture itself both in the New Testament and also the Old. For example Psalm 104 strikingly echoes the Egyptian hymn of Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten) and Proverbs 22.17-24.22 is almost certainly drawn from an earlier Egyptian wisdom tradition known as the 'Teaching of Amenemope'. As C. Wright notes, Israelite wisdom writers, 'participated in a very international dialogue, with an openness to discern the wisdom of God in cultures other than their own'.<sup>14</sup>

The same could be argued for the New Testament, from possible Stoic influences on Paul to the alleged use of Platonic ideas in the Letter to the Hebrews. But the clearest and theologically the most important example comes from the prologue to the fourth gospel with the meditation on *Logos*. As well as having resonances with Hebrew notions of *dabar*, there seem to be clear allusions to Greek sources where we find writers like Heraclitus and Zeno pondering deeply on the mysterious cosmic *Logos*. Now it is possible that the gospel's author was merely contextualizing his message to a wide audience but it is equally possible that he actually found this a helpful Hellenistic concept which sharpened his understanding of the Christ event.

As for hyphenation, the precedent for double belonging is found in the Book

11 D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991).

12 D. Richardson, *Eternity in their Hearts* (Ventura: YWAM Publishing, 1981).

13 See M. Igrave, 'Conversion, Dialogue and Identity' in C. Partridge & H. Reid (eds.), *Finding and Losing Faith*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 18.

14 C. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 441.

of Acts where converted Jews were allowed to remain authentically Jewish in their religious practices even after the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). One is reminded of 'insider movement' missionaries working amongst Arabs today who are experimenting with the idea of Muslim converts being encouraged to remain within the Ummah of Islam.

As we move into Church history we could range from the Neo-Platonism of Augustine to C. Pinnock's partial dependence on Process Theism which itself has its roots in Plato's philosophy.<sup>15</sup> G. McDermott observes that even Calvin found inspiration beyond Scripture in, for example, the stress on rhetoric found in Humanism and the Latin oratory of Cicero which resulted in Calvin's focus on the primacy of preaching and the development of homiletic skills.<sup>16</sup> But are there examples of enrichment from other religions as such? Well it could be argued that Neo-Platonism had all the elements of a religion but I will offer three other interesting cases: one relating to a spiritual discipline and two relating to the concept of God.

The first concerns the origin of the Jesus prayer. This is a time-honoured form of repetitive prayer found within the Eastern Orthodox tradition but has become more widely used in recent years. It is recommended, for instance, in R. Foster's influential book, *Prayer*<sup>17</sup> which has been such an inspiration to many evangelicals. But what is not widely known is that this practice is probably the result of mutual-fulfilment between Muslims and Christians. P. Jenkins writes,

When Russian Orthodox Christians repeat the Jesus Prayer thousands of times in order to create a trancelike state of devotion, they are doing exactly what Sufi Muslims do worldwide with the declaration of faith in Allah, though in this case it is difficult to tell which practice inspired the other.<sup>18</sup>

In fact they may both have been influenced by Far Eastern thought where *mantra* like practice is commonplace. Which brings me to my second example from Church history.

The *apophatic* theology of the Pseudo-Dionysius (5th-6th Century) proved seminal amongst later medieval Christian thinkers and the phrase, 'Dionysius [or Denis or St. Denis] saith' is frequently found in their writings. Now, in turn, the Pseudo-Dionysius himself leaned heavily on the Neo-Platonist thought of Plotinus (205-270 CE) but, as well as the philosophy of Plato, where did Plotinus get his religious inspiration from? Well, it can be strongly argued that this

15 In *The Republic* Plato argues that ultimate reality, which he calls 'the Good', is totally transcendent but in his later work, *Timaeus* he presents a creation myth where the world is fashioned by a divine being who is both Craftsman and Father and even extends to being the World-Soul. Essentially process theologians have added the two together to form dipolar theism.

16 G. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 130.

17 R. Foster, *Prayer* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992), 128.

18 P. Jenkins, *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 266.

was significantly shaped by Eastern religion. Plotinus studied philosophy for ten years in Alexandria which was a cross-cultural hub with connections to India, and in 243 CE he joined the Emperor Gordian's military campaign against the Parthians (Persians) hoping to travel on to India so as to learn something of Eastern philosophy first-hand. Unfortunately the campaign failed and Plotinus fled to Antioch, finally making his way to Rome, where he started his own school of philosophy. But his interest in Asian thought is clear and it can be argued that the concept that the One transcends Being taught by Plotinus and handed on to the Pseudo-Dionysius and subsequent Christian thinkers from Meister Eckhart through Paul Tillich to Jean-Luc Marion today<sup>19</sup> was something he learnt from what we would now call Hindu sources.

A final example from Church history must suffice. Questions of ontology and the nature of God dominated medieval theology and such crucial distinctions as the divine necessity (God is uncaused and is inevitably what he is) as opposed to the contingency of the world (it is divinely caused and could have been different to what it is) which we find exploited by Christian thinkers like Scotus and Aquinas, as well as the Jewish scholar Maimonides, were, in fact, explicitly derived from the fecund mind of the Muslim writer, Avicenna (Ibn Sina, 980-1037CE). He also did important work in the development of the distinction between actuality and possibility which has been taken up by modal logicians and funded the work of modern Christian thinkers like A. Plantinga.<sup>20</sup>

Panikkar's question is pertinent, 'Must one be spiritually a Semite and intellectually a Greek to be a Christian?'<sup>21</sup> Pinnock concurs, 'If Aquinas can use Aristotle, why can we not use Shankara?'<sup>22</sup> Why not indeed?

## Objections

It is time to respond to some possible objections to the notion of mutual fulfilment.

*'We have no need to go outside Christendom for inspiration in terms of our theology or spiritual practice since there are a plethora of resources within the rich traditions of Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism that we can draw upon.'*

But what we forget is that our forefathers were not afraid to 'plunder the Egyptians' and their bravery in borrowing from non-Christian sources has resulted in that wonderfully rich heritage we enjoy. Are we willing to be as bold and creative in our generation?

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19 For more on this see my 'Nothing is Real', *Religion East & West* 6 (2000), 1-20.

20 For example he applies it to the Ontological Argument in: A. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 104-12.

21 Quoted in C. Geffre, 'Double Belonging and the Originality of Christianity as a Religion' in C. Cornille (ed.), *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 96.

22 C. H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 141.

*'There is some nobility and truth to be found in other cultures but not in their pagan religions.'*

Certainly we Christians have long admitted that there are great riches in other cultures and their art-works but we have been reluctant to accept that their religions have anything to teach us. However, we must now recognise that this sacred/secular distinction is a spurious legacy of the Enlightenment and that in most cultures religious life permeates every stratum of their cultural experience such that they do not even have a separate word for religion. How can we say we are nourished by their culture but indifferent or antagonistic to the religious sensibility which informs that culture? Some say that it is a simple matter to separate cultural practices and religion, for example Christians can, in good conscience, practice yoga to maintain suppleness. But the connection between the message and the medium, is a subtly intimate one. This was impressed upon me when talking to a Japanese Christian theologian who was adept in both Western sacred song and the strange style of singing found in Japanese Noh drama. His troupe had the privilege of performing a Noh drama at the Vatican but he said it just didn't transfer and his conclusion was that Japanese singing which is from the belly and is inspired by earthy, chthonic forces resonates well with the traditional wooden stage of Noh but fails in the vast stone spaces of Western cathedrals where sacred choral singing can hover and soar. In other words, the location and mode of singing essentially and inseparably expresses the spiritual message. M. McLuhan spoke with a greater wisdom than he realized when he declared that the medium is the message.

*'You only have to listen to converts from other Faiths to realize that it is a matter of either/or, for they entirely reject their former religion.'*

But it depends on who you talk to and at what stage they have reached in their Christian journey. To an extent, more than we realize, our personal narratives are coloured by our socio-ecclesiological context. Turning to the African continent, this may partially explain why, for example, B. Kato who found himself amongst conservative evangelicals and was trained to doctoral level at Dallas Theological Seminary espoused a replacement theology which repudiated the African Traditional Religion of his past, whereas J. Mbiti who read for his doctorate at Cambridge University and worked at a senior level for the World Council of Churches contended that God had been very active in shaping elements of Africa's primal past.

There is also the issue of when we tell our story. To revert back to my Japanese friend who had actually been trained as a Shinto priest prior to his conversion: he confided in me that, whereas at first he had assumed that his new life steeped in Christian hymns and culture would be totally fulfilling, latterly he had admitted to himself that he missed deep in his soul the riches of his traditional spiritual heritage and thus he had taken up Noh drama.

*'The theory all sounds impressive but, in fact, there is nothing substantial that non-Christian theologies can offer me so why should I study them except to acquire apologetic ammunition?'*

But the potential for mutual enrichment amongst the world's Faiths is well summarised by K. Ward,

The compassion for all beings which Buddhism and Jainism affirm so strongly, the reverence for humanity that characterises Christianity, the love of life of Judaism, the total dependence on the divine will of Islam, the inner harmony and mindfulness of East Asian spirituality and the profound sense of the unity of all things in the cosmic self which is found to such a degree in Hinduism – all these, and many more, are facets of spiritual reality which are discerned in the diverse faiths of the world.<sup>23</sup>

If I might add a thought from my own pilgrimage here, I would say that I have been helped by extra-Christian insights into the spiritual significance of the breath.<sup>24</sup> Hitherto, the act of Jesus breathing on the disciples to receive the Spirit (John 20:22) meant little to me. But then I read of a Jesuit who went to a Hindu sage for advice concerning contemplative prayer and he was instructed to follow the breath.<sup>25</sup> And then I came across Kabir's beautiful utterance that God is the breath beneath the breath. For many, attention to breathing has become an important component of contemplative prayer. I found a helpful thought in the writing of the Christian monk, J. Witkam who, for many years, has integrated Zen meditation techniques into his prayer life. Recognising that *pneuma* can be translated as either 'spirit' or 'breath' he likes to paraphrase Jesus' teaching in John 4:24 that we should worship God in the very act of our breathing.<sup>26</sup>

But even if it is granted that the other religions can add nothing substantial to one's theology, their fresh expressions of known truths can still enrich one's life, whether it is the profound ruminations on the mysterious source of all things in the *Tao Te Ching* or the inspirational love songs of the disciple to his God in Sufi poetry.

*'Hyphenation is just a fancy word for syncretism.'*

Certainly we must always be vigilant that the truth revealed in and through Jesus is never compromised. There is always the danger that proponents of hyphenation slip into religious pluralism where Christianity loses any preferred status in the galaxy of religions. In fact, at the time of writing the Catholic theologian P. Phan, mentioned above, is under investigation by Church authorities not so much for advocating dual-belonging as for apparently maintaining that God does not necessarily want everybody to be a Christian. While exclusivism and inclusivism remain the stuff of in-house evangelical family discussion, there will always remain an abyss between us and the pluralist position which denies the

23 K. Ward, *The Case for Religion* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2004), 233.

24 I have explored the relationship between spirit and breath in detail in: R. Cook, 'Alternative and Complementary Theologies: the Case of Cosmic Energy with special reference to Chi', *Studies in World Christianity, The Edinburgh Review of Theology and Religion* 6.2 (2000), 175-89.

25 A. de Mello, *Sadhana – a way to God* (London: Doubleday, 1984), 7.

26 J. Witkam, *The Eye Aware – Zen lessons for Christians* (New York: Lantern, 2001), 152.

evangel that God 'reconciled himself to us through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation' (2 Cor.5:18; all quotations are from the NIV).

But, bearing in mind the wide diversity of opinion and conviction found within the evangelical family, it must be recognised that there is a wide area of valid exploration. Syncretism occurs when a fundamental tenet of one faith is logically inconsistent with that of another and yet one claims to hold to both. But we must be aware that there is disagreement as to what exactly are the fundamental non-negotiables of Christianity. Some would say that Smart has crossed the line with his failure to recognise innate human wickedness but is this pessimistic view of human nature Scriptural or Augustinian? After all, Scripture-honouring Jews and Eastern Orthodox believers, not to mention Old Testament revering Muslims and M. Fox with his Original Blessing theology, manage to have a less gloomy view of human nature. In turn some would contend that Smart has sold out to unbiblical humanism in embracing Darwinism. There is much room for discussion and discovery here and this discussion needs to take place in a wide cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural arena.

In practice, clear cases of syncretism are harder to pin-down than one would think. Given the mystery of God and the open-textured and highly metaphorical nature of religious language, a clear logical contradiction is difficult to establish. We must beware lest our doctrines become intellectual idols. K. Rahner has rightly said that we in the faith are also 'anonymous Christians' in the sense that we cannot yet fully grasp the richness of the Logos and our heritage in him.<sup>27</sup> Generations of evangelical apologetics have boldly declared that, for example, the Christian doctrine of a personal God and the belief that ultimate spiritual reality is non-personal found in Advaita Hinduism and Therevada Buddhism are logically incompatible; it is a matter of either/or.<sup>28</sup> But is the hyphenation of the two, in fact, a deep paradox, bordering on antinomy, analogous to the apparent logical contradictions inherent in the Christian doctrines of Trinity<sup>29</sup> and Incarnation? Surely there is, at least, room for further discussion and exploration here.

## Conclusion

Let me reiterate, to entertain mutual fulfilment or hyphenation is not necessarily to endorse inclusivism. The question of salvation is a separate issue which I have written about elsewhere.<sup>30</sup> It remains my conviction that all those in glory

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27 See W. G. Jeanron, 'Belonging or Identity' in C. Cornille (ed.), *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 117.

Jeanron is drawing upon K. Rahner, *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol.5 (Einsiedeln, Zurich, Cologne: Benziger, 1962), 136-58 as well as vol. 9, 498-515 and vol.10, 531-46.

28 E.g. H. A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices* (Leicester: Apollon, 1991), 110-11.

29 There is one God; the three persons Father, Son and Spirit are God; but the Father is not the Son is not the Spirit.

30 R. Cook, "'The Sincere Pagan is Sincerely Wrong and Therefore Lost': A Critique", *EQ* 75 (2003), 45-57.

will know that they have Christ to thank for their salvation.

In the latter half of the twentieth century not only the Berlin Wall but invisible Christian walls started to fall. For example the old Protestant/Roman Catholic antipathy became history in many parts of the world (we may be unaware of the significance of the fact that nowadays we are avidly reading Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen and G.K. Chesterton while Catholics are devouring Richard Foster and C.S. Lewis!). In some quarters this is actually becoming full-blown hyphenation, for instance B. McLaren subtitles his influential book,<sup>31</sup> ‘Why I am an evangelical + post/protestant + fundamentalist/Calvinist + anabaptist/Anglican + catholic’ etc.! In this article I have sought to inform the evangelical community of the growing interest in hyphenation across the religions as well and to forestall any attempt at a pre-emptive lock-down of evangelical discussion on the matter.

Undoubtedly we need to avoid undue optimism and naïve endorsement of the religions. Human religiosity is indeed high-voltage, like human sexuality, and both propensities can result in the greatest insight and nobility, but also the basest degradation. The Old Testament roundly condemns those surrounding religions that were typified by idolatry, fertility cults, sacred prostitution and necromancy and the spirit of these still live on in today’s religious world. However, it should be observed that there is a strand of Old Testament teaching which suggests that the task is not to obliterate the foreign gods (replacement) but to bring them to a place where they submit to the lordship of Yahweh (fulfilment), for ‘God presides in the great assembly; he gives judgement among the gods’ (Ps.82:1).

If God is anywhere he must be everywhere, working to inspire the human family with his Kingdom values of beauty, goodness and truth. We Christians have inside knowledge that whenever a culture or religion manages to strike the rock and find the living water gushing forth it is, in fact, the hidden Christ just as he, according to Paul, followed the Hebrews through the desert to be their incognito water of life (1 Cor.10:4). Surely we should be open to heed the wisdom of that great *Logos* who is ‘the true light that gives light to every man’ (John 1:9) wherever we find it.

It seems appropriate to end with Paul’s exhortation: ‘Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things’ (Phil. 4:8-9). G. Fee comments, ‘These concluding exhortations call us to embrace what is good wherever we find it.’<sup>32</sup>

## Abstract

This article seeks to describe the nature and context of religious hyphenation or dual-belonging as it relates to Christianity. Some examples are provided along

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31 B. McLaren, *a Generous Or+hodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

32 G. Fee, *Philippians* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1999), 181.

with an assessment which connects the phenomenon to mutual-fulfilment theology. This theology is defended and some precedents are suggested from both Scripture and Church history. Various objections to dual-belonging are then considered and rejected, and the article concludes with a plea for evangelicals to avoid a premature dismissal of hyphenation but rather to join in the debate of this important issue.

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