Reconfiguring Christian Uniqueness and Particularity through Interreligious Dialogue

Catherine Cornille
Boston College

The notion of Christian uniqueness has traditionally been regarded as a stumbling block for interreligious dialogue. This article focuses on interreligious dialogue as itself a means to discover the particularity or uniqueness of Christianity. It looks into the experiences of religious hybridity, holy envy, and interreligious theology as three avenues for developing the idea of the uniqueness of Christianity (or of any other religion) in a relational way.

The topic of the uniqueness of Christianity has played an outsized role in the areas of theology of religions and interreligious dialogue. The Christian belief in the unique salvific role of Jesus Christ has been regarded as the main impediment or stumbling block for genuine openness and dialogue with other religions. Hence, for the past decades, Christian theologians of religions have put all their effort in rethinking the traditional understanding of the uniqueness of Jesus. This has led to the well-worn paradigms of inclusivism, exclusivism and pluralism, and to decades of discussion of their validity and overall usefulness. This discussion and critique of Christian uniqueness has been conducted strictly within Christian theology of religions and on the basis of *a priori* faith commitments and convictions. While the various positions one may adopt regarding the uniqueness of Jesus may affect the degree of openness toward the religious other, it says little about what Christianity might contribute to the dialogue itself.

The term interreligious dialogue encompasses a variety of different types of engagement between religions, from friendly neighborly relations to advanced theological exchange, and from collaboration for the common good to immersion in one another's spiritual and religious practices. The goals of interreligious dialogue may range from peaceful coexistence to genuine learning from one another. In order to overcome potential tension and in order to find common

ground, the dialogue between religions has often focused on similarities or points of connection. This is indeed an important step beyond the old and natural animosity that may arise when individuals meet whose heartfelt beliefs, practices and values do not overlap and at times directly contradict one another. But it misses out on what different religions may bring to the conversation and learn from one another. The dialogue between religions may also become a privileged occasion to discover one's own particularity. Just as individuals discover their own unique personality traits only in relation to others, so religious individuals may only become aware of the particularity of their beliefs and practices in relation to the religious other. Daniel Madigan also points out that:

> 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.[1]

Interreligious dialogue may thus become a process of self-discovery, of discovery of one's own particularity through the other. Here, the notion of uniqueness is not posited *a priori*, but uncovered *a posteriori*, in relation to the religious other. Every dialogue may then reveal various dimensions of one's particularity, as they stand out in relation to the particularity of the other religion.

This relational approach to particularity may in turn enhance the contribution of Christianity (and of each religion) to the dialogue and to the common good. With regard to the role of religion in the public sphere, Lenn Goodman also states that "What social bodies need is a way of learning and profiting from differences—not denying, minimizing, trivializing, or romanticizing them."[2] It is true that dialogue may reveal all kinds of particularities, some edifying and some less so, some relevant to the partner in dialogue and some not. Dialogue may take the form of mutual critique, of critical awareness of particular inconsistencies, gaps, failure to live up to one's own highest ideals, or violence toward the religious other. But it may also lead to a renewed appreciation and repossession of particular beliefs or practices that stand out in relation to other religions and that may contribute to the common good.

There are various ways in which the relational particularity of a religion may come to the fore. It may surface in the experience of religious hybridity or

1. 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*, edited by T. Merrigan and P. Glorieux (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2011), 166.

2. Lenn Goodman, *Religious Pluralism and Values in the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 194.

dual belonging, where individuals come to identify with elements of another religious tradition while holding on to certain aspects of their original tradition. The particularity of a religion may here surface in those elements one would not wish to abandon or compromise in spite of the serious appeal of the other religion. A second avenue for discerning particularity is through the eyes of the religious other. Whereas members of other religions will of course detect many differences with their own religious beliefs and practices, it is those differences that are the occasion for what Krister Stendhal calls "holy envy" or what Yaerly calls "spiritual regret" that may raise awareness of certain treasures in one's religion. A third way to discover religious particularities is through lengthy immersion in another religious tradition which allows one to rediscover the values or admirable aspects of one's own religion.

Each of these approaches to religious particularity may lift up different aspects of a religion, depending on the particular individual and tradition involved. We will here focus on elements of Christian particularity that have surfaced through engagement with Hinduism in the experience of Hindu-Christian hybridity, in the Christian teachings or practices that Hindus have found particularly inspiring, and in the rediscovery of Christian particularity of Christians immersed in the Hindu tradition.

Religious Hybridity

One of the religious phenomena that has garnered considerable scholarly attention over the past decades is that of religious hybridity, variously referred to as dual religious belonging, multiple religious participation, or spiritual fluidity. It refers to individuals who identify with more than one religion. While this has been common in the East for millennia, where Chinese have identified with Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, and Japanese with Shinto and Buddhism simultaneously, it is a relatively new phenomenon in many other parts of the world. The ready access to the teachings and practices of any number of religions, combined with a looser attachment to traditionally dominant religions has led to a marketplace of religions, where individuals have come to choose elements from a variety of religious offerings according to their own taste and judgment.

Religious hybridity may be regarded as a form of internal dialogue. In his approach to interreligious dialogue, Raimon Panikkar states that the deepest forms of dialogue take place "in the depth of the person… in which one struggles with the angel, the daimon, and oneself."[3] The literature on religious

3. Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-religious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), xvii.

hybridity has focused mainly on the possibility or desirability of such dual or multiple belonging. It has been approached from doctrinal, practical, spiritual, or phenomenological points of view, and has generated a variety of arguments for and against dual belonging.[4] In the newly edited volume *Hindu-Christian Dual Belonging*, the focus is mainly on the possibility of dual belonging from a Christian theological point of view. The emphasis is thus still on whether the incorporation of Hindu elements is permissible and possible, rather than on which Christian elements are worth saving in the plunge into Hinduism.[5] Our question, here, however, is not precisely what particular Christian elements are emphasized or preserved in combination with Hinduism.

The earliest examples of Hindu-Christian hybridity were Hindus who had come to identify with Christian elements without converting to Christianity. Many of the nineteenth century Hindu reformers were profoundly shaped by the example and teachings of Jesus Christ. Referring to Rammohan Roy as a "Protestant Hindu," M. M. Thomas states that it was in particular Jesus's ethics and monotheism that attracted him, and that framed his own approach to Hindu reform.[6] Though never converting to Christianity, Keshab Chandra Sen was even more deeply shaped by the example and teaching of Jesus Christ. He sought to establish a "Hindu Church of Christ," the Church of the New Dispensation which would combine Christian teachings with Hindu cultural elements. For him, it was in particular the teachings of forgiveness and self-sacrifice which stood out as distinctly Christian and necessary for the reformation of Hinduism and India:

> I assure you, brethren, 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.[7]

Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya (1861–1907) was a Brahmin who converted to Christianity without fully renouncing his Hindu identity. He developed elabo-

4. Catherine Cornille, ed., *Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002). Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could not Be a Christian* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009). 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* (Ferney: World Council of Churches, 2016). John Barnett, *Christian and Sikh. A Practical Theology of Multiple Religious Participation* (Durham: Sacristi Press, 2021).

5. Daniel Soars and Nadya Pohram, eds., *Hindu-Christian Dual Belonging* (Abington: Routledge, 2022).

6. M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Hindu Renaissance* (London: SCM, 1969), 8 ff.

7. Quoted in M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Hindu Renaissance*, 57.

rate apologetics about the truth of Christianity. Among the things that drew him to Christianity were the comprehensiveness and the universality of the teachings of Jesus:

> 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.[8]

He also believed that Christianity offered 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." Referring to examples as St. Francis and Father Damien, he asks:

> 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?[9]

In spite of these early examples, the phenomenon of Hindu-Christian religious hybridity has come to be mainly discussed in terms of the immersion of cradle Christians into Hindu spiritual teachings and practices, and more specifically into the tradition of non-duality or *Advaita Vedanta*.[10] The question here is thus why these hybrids still remain attached to their religion of birth, and what elements in particular they do not wish to abandon in spite of the appeal of the other religion? Some of the pioneers of this type of religious hybridity are Henri Le Saux (Abhishiktananda) (1910–1973), Bede Griffiths (1906–1993), and Raimon Panikkar (1918–2010). 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. Christians who identify with another religion tend to mainly feel the need to explain and justify the appeal of the other religion, rather than reflecting on the reasons why they are still grounded in or inspired by their Christian faith. For many, it is in the first place their attachment to the person of Jesus Christ which informs their loyalty to Christianity. But beyond this, there

8. Julius Lipner and George Gispert-Sauch, eds., *The Writings of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay,* vol. II (Bangalore: United Theological College, 2002), 192.

9. *Ibid*., 24–26.

10. While Hindu social customs (such as caste and untouchability) and ritual elements have long infused Christianity in India, and while both Hindus and Christians occasionally visit one another's shrines in search for divine help and miracles, the term religious hybridity is here used only for cases of conscious and sustained identification with the teachings and practices of another religion.

are particular teachings and principles that come to stand out in relationship to the other tradition.

For Abhishiktananda, the distinctiveness or particularity of Christianity lies in its communal aspects and in its emphasis on love as the essence of the divine reality. The two elements are intimately intertwined in the following statements:

> Christianity is the revelation that Being is Love (cf. 1 Cor 13: 2, 1 John 4: 16).[11]

> 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.[12]

> The Church is essentially *agape* (love) and koinonia (being-with, being-together). She is the sign and sacrament of the divine koinonia of Being. By her very nature she is communion in love, and her function in mankind is to produce a ferment of love.[13]

Though the element of love is also present in Hindu devotion or *bhakti*, the non-duality of ultimate reality in the tradition of *advaita vedanta* does not allow for relationship in or with the divine reality. Bede Griffiths, who followed in the footsteps of Le Saux, also argued that what distinguishes the Christian understanding is that "Being is not only consciousness, but also love, that there is relationship at the heart of reality."[14]

Another element that these pioneers of Hindu-Christian religious hybridity noticed is the particular Christian attention to time, history, and to human limitations and dependency on divine grace. Le Saux, for example, states 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."[15] Raimon Panikkar's journey in the field of religious hybridity is captured in his famous statement: "I 'left' as a christian, I 'found' myself a hindu, and I 'return' a buddhist, without having ceased to be a christian."[16] Though Panikkar ubiquitously draws from the Christian biblical and theological tradition in expounding his cosmotheandric approach to reality, he does not

11. Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda. A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience* (London: ISPCK, 1994), 136.
12. *Ibid.*, 135.
13. *Ibid.*, 137.
14. *Ibid.*, 35.
15. *Ibid.*, 145.
16. Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-religious Dialogue*, 42.

often elaborate on what may be considered distinctly Christian. Among the rare exceptions is this quote which emphasizes the existence of a divine reality which is independent of human existence and imagination, and which reveals itself in the world:

> 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.[17]

It must be said that the experience of religious hybridity involving Christianity and the Hindu tradition of *advaita vedanta* often involves the dissolution of all particularities in the reality of non-duality. Abhishiktananda, for example, struggled his whole life in India with the attempt to preserve the uniqueness of the person of Jesus Christ in light of his embrace of the philosophy of *advaita vedanta*. In the Ajatananda interreligious ashram, inspired primarily by Ahishiktananda and his disciple Ajatananda, the focus is barely on the particularity or distinctiveness of Christianity. While the person of Jesus Christ is revered, he is regarded as one among many religious masters who have realized the non-duality of reality.

Holy Envy

One of the ways in which the distinctiveness of a religion reveals itself is through the eyes of the religious other. Believers tend to take their tradition for granted and rarely consider what may be different or unique about their own beliefs and practices. They may regard the metaphysical claims of other religions as strange or absurd without often considering how their own metaphysical beliefs come across to others. Or they may admire certain insights or practices in other religions without being aware of what others might find admirable in their own tradition.

While religious others often offer an important critical mirror which draws attention to the problems and shortcomings of one's own religion, they also may help us to discover one's more noble or edifying particularities. This may be expressed in terms of "holy envy" or "spiritual regret." The term "holy envy" was coined by Kristen Stendhal at the occasion of the inauguration of the Church

17. *Ibid*., 131.

of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints in Stockholm. In response to the opposition to this, he proposed 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.[18] The notion of "spiritual regret" expresses the same feeling of admiration and awe for certain teachings and practices of another religion that are not (yet) found in one's own tradition and that may or may not be reconcilable.[19]

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:

> I heard of well known Hindu having converted to Christianity. It was the talk of the town hat, when he was baptized, he had to eat beef and drink liquor, that he also had to change his clothes, and that thenceforth he began to go about in European costume including a hat. These things got on my nerves. Surely, thought I, a religion that compelled one to eat beef, drink liquor and change one's clothes did not deserve the name. I also heard that the new convert had already begun abusing the religion of his ancestors, their customs and their country. All these things created in me a dislike for Christianity.[20]

After arriving in England, Gandhi's perception of Christianity changed through his friendships with Christians and through reading the Bible. He relates 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."[21] This became the inspiration for his leitmotif of non-violence. The cross was for Gandhi a magnet as a symbol of nonviolence and voluntary suffering:

18. 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 us of the term, see Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy. Finding God in the Faith of Others* (New York: Harper, 2019).

19. The term tends to suggest a fundamental incommensurability. However, the very appeal of those particular elements may also generate possibilities for learning from the other.

20. Gandhi, *An Autobiography. The Stories of My Experiments with Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 33–34.

21. *Ibid.*, 68.

> 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 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.[22]

The centrality of self-sacrificing love was thus for Gandhi a distinctive element in the experience and teaching of Jesus. He did not accept the Christian interpretation of Jesus death as atonement, stating that the argument that Jesus died for the sins of mankind "utterly failed to convince me." He noted that it seemed to provide license to Christians to commit transgressions, and stated that "I do not seek redemption from the consequences of my sin. I seek to be redeemed from sin itself, or rather from the very thought of sin."[23] The cross and suffering of Jesus thus represented for Gandhi an example to follow, rather than an article of faith. In addition to the "eternal law of love," Gandhi also singles 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.[24]

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 Anatanand Rambachan, who is one of the foremost contemporary thinkers within the tradition of non-duality. In a recent lecture, he mentions a 1981 interreligious dialogue meeting in Rajpur,

22. From a conversation on the train to Bardoli, 1939, quoted in S. Shamir Hassan, "Gandhi, Jews and Zionism," *Proceedings of Indian History Congress* 54 (1993): 748–751.

23. *Autobiography*, 124.

24. M. K. Gandhi, "Advice to Muslims" (26 October 1947). Quoted in *Gandhi's Bible*, edited by William Emielsen (London: ISPCK, 2009), 123.

where his encounter with Christians for the first time drew his attention to the importance of justice at the center of religious consciousness. He relates that his own traditional training had not engaged social questions and problems in connection to the pursuit of liberation. This encounter with Christianity, and in particular with the Biblical texts on the last judgment (Matt. 25: 31–46), which he states is his "favorite Christian text" led him to a critical reflection on his own tradition and a search for theological resources in the Hindu tradition that would affirm the dignity of every human being and combat social injustice. All of this led to the publication of *A Hindu Theology of Liberation* in which he tackles with the problems of patriarchy, homophobia, casteism, anthropocentrism, and childism, inspired by Catholic Social Teaching but drawing from resources available in Hinduism. Like Gandhi, he also turns to the Cross as a source of inspiration. While Hinduism has many divine manifestations, he states, 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. *Ahimsa*, he states, is here "the outcome of love." In the case of Jesus, this love expressed itself in a special concern for the oppressed, the victims, the powerless. While divine love certainly embraces all, this focus on the marginalized, and the Christian tradition of liberation with its "preferential option for the poor" is what Rambachan has found particularly inspiring in Christianity.

Intercultural and Interreligious Theology

Even though there is no better way to become aware of one's own particularity than through the eyes of the other, one may also come close to the same realization by deep immersion in the culture or the tradition of the other, which often generates a new critical self-awareness. As individuals live and work in cultures that have been dominated by other religions, the distinctiveness of their own beliefs and ways inevitable comes to the fore. This is the case in particular with missionaries or representatives of one religion who intensively engage another religious tradition. While such deep engagement may lead to dual belonging (as mentioned above) it may also simply lead to a new self-awareness. The work of the Indian Jesuit, George Soarez-Prabhu, may serve as an example. A renown biblical scholar, he was also deeply involved in the dialogue with Hinduism.

He distances himself from the way in which the uniqueness of Jesus and of Christianity has 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 mysterious way, does not really seem to matter), and of much presumption (for it presumes to know the mind of God).[25]

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."[26] However, in most of his writings, he does reflect on the distinctiveness of Christianity, especially in relation to Hinduism and Buddhism. In this, Soares-Prabhu focuses mainly on the experience and teachings of Jesus. He argues that Jesus's experience of God as unconditional love was "absolutely unique."[27] He elaborates on the particularity of 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 points out that this does not mean that Christianity has a rich set of teachings on prayer. Compared with Hinduism or Buddhism "prayer techniques are poorly developed in Christianity."[28] However, "what Jesus gives us is a new attitude in prayer, emerging out of a new experience of God."[29] Prayer is "an interpersonal 'conversation' with God, in which love is experienced and given, and relations of intimacy founded."[30]

Even more important than the particular approach to prayer is Jesus's 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

25. George Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, edited by Francis D'Sa (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003), 96.

26. *Ibid*., 96.

27. *Ibid*., 88.

28. *Ibid*., 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." *Ibid*., 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 *Saccidananada* (London: ISPCK, 1974), 200.

29. *Ibid*., 210.

30. *Idem*.

> (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 "brother." The horizontal is thus inseparably welded into the vertical, and love of neighbor is brought onto a level with love of God.[31]

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."[32] This love is to focus in particular on the poor, the vulnerable and the marginalized, and is to include one's enemies. One of the distinctive features of Jesus's life "is his table fellowship with sinners and outcastes."[33] Soares-Prabhu is thus particularly distressed about the fact that caste discrimination continues to exist in Christian communities in India[34] 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."[35] With regard to the command of loving one's enemies, he recognizes that it "is not a uniquely Christian demand, as is sometimes suggested."[36] But for him, "there is something particularly impressive in Jesus's 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."[37]

This is also how Soares-Prabhu interprets the Christian notion of sin (which is at times regarded as part of Christian distinctiveness) in relationship to love, since "Jesus has so radicalized the norms of right conduct (love) that all

31. *Ibid.*, 198.

32. *Ibid.*, 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." *Ibid.*, 170.

33. *Ibid.*, 117. Soares-Prabhu also refers to the Jewish scholar Geza Vermez who mentions this as distinctive of Jesus's life.

34. He puts it powerfully when he states that "When caste discrimination enters into the celebration of the Eucharist, the sin becomes sacriledge." *Ibid.*, 128.

35. *Ibid.*, 130.

36. *Ibid.*, 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."

37. *Ibid.*, 199.

claims to sinlessness are effectively foreclosed."[38] However, even as Christianity acknowledges human limitation in living up to the highest religious ideal, it also emphasizes the possibility of forgiveness as a constant and core element of Christian faith. In reflecting on what Hindus might consider to be essential and distinctive about Christianity, Soares-Prabhu states:

> 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 teaching of Jesus and the concrete forms they assume in the New Testament give them a specifically Christian significance.[39]

This attitude of forgiveness requires "the cultivation of a non-judgmental attitude toward self and others" which has also been developed in other Indian religions, and from which Christians might learn.[40] However, in Christianity, forgiveness is ultimately and uniquely grounded in an all-loving and forgiving God.

In the end, for Soarez-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 "The 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."[41]

This centrality of loving and self-giving commitment to the poor and the vulnerable is a constant theme in the work of other Christian theologians in India and throughout Asia. In the closing document of the conference and publication *The Future of Asian Theology*, the participants state:

> We are encouraged by the fact that due to the many efforts by the Asian Churches and Asian theologies, people's theologies—Minjung theology, Dalit theology, Tribal/Indigenous People's theology, Feminist theology, Environmental theology, Public theology have emerged

38. *Ibid.*, 225.

39. *Ibid.*, 220.

40. "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." *Ibid.*, 224–225.

41. *Ibid.*, 97.

to engage in dialogue of religions, cultures and people. These emerging theologies point to the foregrounding of Asian Churches and Theologies at the centre of the lives and struggles of the people of Asia, especially of the poor and the vulnerable.

Asian Churches and Theologies have attempted to become the Church of the poor and theologising with the poor.[42]

Conclusion

In shifting from *a priori* notions of Christian uniqueness to *a posteriori* awareness of religious particularity or distinctiveness, dialogue with other religions is indispensable. It is only through dialogue, through partial identification with the other and through the eyes of the other that the particularity of one's own tradition comes to light. Such dialogue may reveal various types or kinds of particularities, from the particularity of ritual dress, gestures and implements to the peculiarities of institutional structures, and from historical contingencies to particular doctrinal grammars. Many of these particularities may be a matter of indifference or even scorn on the part of the religious other. The particularities that are relevant for the dialogue, however, are those that are considered to be a source of enrichment by the partner in dialogue and a contribution to the common good. While these particularities may surface in different ways, they become particularly evident in the experience of attachment and nostalgia of religious hybrids, in the holy envy of the religious other, and in the judgment of individuals who have immersed themselves deeply in the tradition of the other. It is thus through the dialogue itself that one becomes aware of the particularities that matter for the dialogue. While we have focused here on the particularity of Christianity, it is evident that this method may be used to discern the particularity of any religion in relation to other religions.

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 attain greater humility while simultaneously assuming greater self-awareness and efficacy in the dialogue. The shift from uniqueness to particularity may be regarded as controversial, as a new form of apologetics that seeks to affirm or salvage the idea of the superiority or the exclusivity of Christianity over against other religious traditions. However, the notion of relational particularity does not presume exclusivity or hierarchy. First, the particularity of one religion necessarily implies the particularity of

42. Paul Hwang, ed., *Asian Theology for the Future* (Seoul: CATS, 2012), 342.

another. It is only in the interplay between religious particularities that any religion comes to awareness of its own. Each religion thus assumes its own particularity in relation to others. Second, the notion of particularity does not imply its exclusivity. Attention to religious particularity or distinctiveness does not suggest that whatever stands out in one religion is completely absent in another religion. As various religions develop through history, certain elements may have been more explicitly emphasized or developed at the expense of others. Religious traditions tend to be complex and internally diverse, and, as Perry Schmidt-Leukel points out in his fractal theory of religious diversity, it is often the case that "central aspects of the other's religion have parallels in one's own tradition."[43] As such, the particularity of another religion may often serve to awaken one to forgotten, neglected or marginalized aspects of one's own tradition.[44] And even when certain practices or beliefs may not seem to be present or developed in a tradition, they may not be incompatible.[45] Attention to the particularity of each religion may thus serve the process of mutual development and growth in dialogue. To be sure, there may be particularities that are indeed unique and that have no parallel in other religious traditions, or that are not immediately compatible. But that, too, may serve a deeper self-awareness.

The notion of relational particularity, moreover, preempts any sweeping claims to exclusivity or superiority. It is only in relation to a concrete other that certain features come to the fore. Different relationships with differing religious other may thus evoke different particularities. And different individuals involved in dialogue may come to notice different particularities. This approach to religious particularity is thus far removed from the nineteenth-century attempts to distill the universal and timeless essence of Christianity (Loisy, Von Harnack, Troeltsch). Any such attempt was seen to reveal mostly the identity of its author. In critiquing von Harnack and Loisy for presenting a form of Christianity that looks a lot like a "Pietist of Halle" or a "French layman of the pietist unlettered sort" the Anglican T. A. Lacey suggested that instead of a modern European "one would wish for the work of a Jew, not too modern, not too Western."[46]

In the engagement with Hinduism and Hindus, various elements of Christian particularity come to the fore. The elements that are noted by Hindus, by

43. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2017), 235.

44. This is the type of learning in comparative theology that I have designated as recovery or rediscovery. In Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (Chichester: Wiley, 2020), 124–129.

45. The discovery of elements in other religions that are compatible with one's own may lead to religious learning and enrichment through a process of borrowing or appropriation.

46. T. A. Lacey, *Harnack and Loisy*: 14–15, quoted by Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity*, 143.

Christians and by Hindu-Christians are emphasis on the inseparability of love of God and love of neighbor, the call to self-sacrifice and care for the poor and the vulnerable, the reality of mercy and forgiveness and the requirement to forgive one another. The Christian conception of God is essentially relational and recognizes the limits of religious or spiritual autonomy. Though not absent in Hinduism, or in certain traditions of Hinduism, these elements seem to stand out as particular to Christianity and of particular value in the Hindu-Christian dialogue.

Though the focus of relational particularity may be seen to diminish claims to universality, it may also be seen to enhance the universality of certain teachings or practices insofar as they are considered relevant not only for Christians or from a Christian point of view, but more broadly. In its ability to relate to other religious traditions, and to give and take through dialogue, the universal relevance of a particular teachings and practices is demonstrated, rather than assumed or presupposed. The more Christianity is related to religious others, and the more broadly and deeply those relationships developed, the more it becomes "universal."

The shift from the theological language of uniqueness to the more phenomenological language of particularity is not meant to discard or downplay the former. For Christians, the notion of the unique salvific function of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ forms an essential element of faith which cannot and should not be sacrificed for the sake of dialogue. The discourses of uniqueness and of particularity are moreover not entirely unrelated, since it is because of the belief in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ that certain teachings and practices have gained particular weight in Christianity. Christian theologians may thus continue to debate the meaning of Christian uniqueness in light of the reality of religious plurality. But this internal Christian theological discourse is of little import for other religions (except insofar as it might hinder genuine openness and respect for the other). 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. It is not because of her theology that Mother Teresa of Calcutta is universally remembered and admired, but because of her single-minded dedication to the vulnerable in Indian society.

In his famous book *The Dignity of Difference*, Jonathan Sachs calls on religions to respect the particularity of each religion, and allow it its own integrity and autonomy.[47] 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 would thus represent a significant corrective, and a step toward peace and dialogue. But I argue here that the understanding of difference may be itself the fruit of dialogue, and that it may become the occasion not only for mutual respect, but also for mutual enrichment. It is of course up to each religion to determine what it may want to learn from other religions. But it may also serve the dialogue when each religion becomes aware of its particular strengths or gifts and what it may contribute to the feast of interreligious engagement and mutual enrichment.

47. Jonathan Sachs, *The Dignity of Difference. How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).