

The Triune God and the Plethora of Religions: The Holy Spirit in Mission

by Scott W. Sunquist

Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from Scott W. Sunquist's 2013 book entitled, Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory, pp. 259–268. It is used by permission of Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group (<http://www.bakerpublishinggroup.com>). See ad p. 2.

At a Christian gathering in 1993 in the United States, the following prayer to the goddess Sophia was given: “We are women in your image. With the hot blood of our wombs we give form to new life.... With nectar between our thighs we invite a lover. We birth a child. With our warm body fluids we remind the world of its pleasures and sensations.”¹

After this prayer, women were invited to receive a red dot in the middle of their forehead, a sign of the sixth chakra, or seat of divine wisdom.² A middle-aged Indian woman, whose grandfather was a convert to Christianity from Hinduism, refused to have a dot placed on her forehead. She explained to the surprised Anglo-American Presbyterian,

When I was a young girl in Ludhianna, India, I came home from school one day with a red dot on my forehead and my mother sat me down and said, ‘Honey, why do you have that red dot on your forehead?’ I explained that some of my friends had them at school and they asked if I wanted one too. I thought it looked nice. My mother explained we should never have a red dot on our heads. Then she said, ‘We are Christians. When you were young, we brought you to church, baptized you, and the priest took holy oil and marked the sign of the cross on your forehead in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You have been marked already by the cross of Jesus Christ.

In this Indian Christian’s mind, being marked by the Spirit of the living God meant something very deep and serious. She understood that one could be “marked” or set aside for other uses and for other service—but she was set aside to serve the Triune God alone. Each religion is its own “web of significance;”³ or, to put it as Paul Tillich does, “A mixture of religions destroys in each of them the concreteness which gives it its dynamic power.”⁴

There is no issue in today’s missiology that is more contested and at the same time more important than the nature of the multitude of religions and the Christian belief in one God as revealed in Jesus Christ. This would not be much of an issue if Jesus had been more understanding, more tolerant, of his own religious friends. However, Jesus was pretty strong on false belief and false (or hypocritical) action, and the Old Testament is even stronger. We

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should begin this section by noting that Jesus's harshest words were to those closest to his own beliefs—the Jews—and he seemed the most tolerant, or open, to those furthest (it is good to remember Luke 4:23–30 at this point). By analogy, it would be good for us to be strongest in our critique of the church and more gracious to those who seem furthest from Jesus (but who may be very close!).

I spent a year trying to decide where to put the discussion on religions in a missiology book that is focused on a trinitarian approach to mission. It was in a moment of sudden insight that I realized that our struggle with “religions” is that we usually start with Jesus (which is not a bad idea) rather than the Holy Spirit (which I think is a better idea). Simply put, I have come to believe that God's Spirit is at work in all peoples and his Spirit seeks to recover the image of God in each person and in every culture. The same Holy Spirit who applies redemption to us, and gives us spiritual gifts, is also working in the lives of people of other loyalties. Therefore, when we talk about other religions, we are talking about ultimate loyalties that reflect both truth and error. This has been recognized throughout the twentieth century, especially in earlier gatherings of the International Missionary Council. Thus, we can and should affirm that Christian witness to someone of another faith involves a spiritual awareness of God's presence in others, even while the Holy Spirit is calling others to the cross. For example, Cornelius was not a Christian (he was a seeker, a God-fearer), but God's Holy Spirit spoke to him and led him to the man who would deliver the message of Jesus Christ to him (Acts 10).

Another reason for placing the discussion of religions in this chapter on the Holy Spirit is it reflects that reality, and all theology, in the end, must connect with real people and real situations. I have interviewed many people from Africa and Asia who were raised in other religions

(mostly Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists), and all have had some definite experience of the Holy Spirit *before* they were Christian. Some had reoccurring dreams calling them to Jesus, some had a demon cast out, and one had a vision of heaven in which the angels were playing Sri Lankan instruments. If people of other faiths have experiences of the Holy Spirit, and if all people are made in the image of God, and if the Holy Spirit is the One who works to restore that image in redemption, then missiology should place the study of other faiths under the topic of the Holy Spirit.

Christian mission, as we have noted, is the mission of God bringing forth his glory for the nations of the world. It is a work of the Triune God, whereby



nations or cultures are honored and “lifted up.” Religions are part of every culture, and therefore Christian mission speaks to the religious dimension of each culture. We must avoid two temptations when it comes to Christian mission and religions. On the one hand, it is too easy in the globalized free market economy of religions to see religions as items on a shelf that can be taken or ignored. According to this mind-set, religions are neutral variables in any culture, and therefore we can ignore religious belief and then get on with the real mission of doing justice and loving mercy. But religions are never neutral, and if we treat religions as a commodity, we are misunderstanding both the role of religion and the religious person. Secular Western

governments have made this mistake in foreign policy decisions in Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Christians should know better.

The second temptation is to make religion everything, and view the gospel as needing to attack each religion. Religions are not so easily reified (made into a thing) and are much more complex and relational than this view allows for. When we speak about religions, we need to speak about religious people: people who have particular faith commitments. Therefore, we do not want to pretend that religions are so small a thing (like the color of a shirt we might wear), nor so great a thing (like the only concern of Christian mission). Religious belief and practice is always expressed in languages and cultures; it can be all-consuming for a people or nation, or a nation can try to ignore it—but it is always present. Jesus Christ seeks to dwell in each culture, and therefore religious beliefs and practices will become important as the Holy Spirit works to bring forth faith and sanctification.

As we have seen in the above brief look at the Holy Spirit in the Bible, God's Spirit reaches out and calls people to himself. We have looked at the Spirit speaking through preachers, evangelists, prophets, and even to pagan kings (Pharaoh of Egypt and King Nebuchadnezzar) and religious non-Christians (Cornelius). In each of these cases, God's Spirit is drawing people closer to himself, to a greater understanding of who God is and what his will is for individuals. Revelation by the Holy Spirit is a call to repentance and obedience. As we now look at Christian mission and religions we reaffirm this theological truth: God is the One who, through his Holy Spirit, draws people to Jesus Christ. We are invited to participate in communicating his love and mercy for his greater glory.

Having said this, we remember that the gospel has often been carried to people of other faiths in both appropriate and inappropriate ways. Christian mission

has a checkered past. It is important to remember the violence and inappropriate work of the Spanish using the *Requirimento* in the Americas; mission was mixed with conquest and monks were caught in the cross fire. It is also important, however, to remember the careful study of religions that marked the work of the Jesuits in Japan, Vietnam, China, and India, as well as the work of people like Ziegenbalg and Plutschau in India, Hudson Taylor in China, and many others. Recognizing the work of the Holy Spirit requires us to do careful study of other religions and cultures, so as to be a servant of the other. Those whom we love, and those whom God loves, deserve to become known by us. Mission is about communication, and communication involves relationship. The more intimate a relationship, such as communicating the deep love of God, the more knowledge and empathy is required. Thus, we take time to point out major themes in studying other religions, so as to be faithful communicators of the gospel.⁵

Points of Religious Contact

Christian mission to people of other faiths involves much more than any single concern (such as salvation or peacemaking). I think it is helpful to think about relating to people of other faiths with several different points of contact: areas that we need to discuss with our neighbor of another faith. Each of these areas becomes an opportunity for better understanding and is an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to bring about conversion or (for the missionary) sanctification.⁶ Later we will talk at length about evangelism as part of Christian mission to people of other faiths, but here we look at the fundamental issue in a missional encounter: listening, understanding, and engaging.

Salvation/Salvations

First, although it is not the only issue, we do relate to our Buddhist or Muslim neighbor concerning salvation and

A *Theravada Buddhist does not believe in God, so there is no “one” to reveal further truths.*

the afterlife; but we have to be careful, because another religious person may have a very different view of salvation. Therefore, we need to ask what they seek to be saved from, how that might happen, and what an afterlife might look like. Most religions are based on the intuition that “the world is not right and I am not right.” The Bible calls this sin; the Buddha identified suffering (the first Noble Truth) as the main problem. The cause of this problem (suffering) for Buddhists is attachment, and so the call to salvation is a call to become completely unattached. Many people do not even understand what they are saved from, or what the goal of their religion is, so a dialogue may produce little light and more questions than answers. Seeking answers together, however, will open up the relationship to further understanding regarding salvation. How we view the afterlife will determine how we live in this life.⁷

Revelation

The second issue for dialogue is revelation. Some people of other faiths have no concept of the revelation of truth from God, or Allah, or Brahman—only a personal enlightenment. A Theravada Buddhist does not believe in God, so there is no “one” to reveal further truths. Others have even higher views of revelation in a sacred text than most Christians have (I am thinking of Islam here). Who reveals, and how truths are revealed, are both important questions to ask. To follow up, however, we would want to know if that revelation can be apprehended by all people or, like Gnosticism, is it a secret or private knowledge? What does the person say about, or know about, God? Is God even knowable or, like in many religions, is God known only as a distant creator who abandoned

creation and now can only be known indirectly through ancestors? Are there many names for God, no name, or a single name? What are the primary and secondary characteristics of God? Is God loving? Is God frightening?

Ethics and the Moral Life

Third, we must relate to people of other faiths as we live in community and as we make moral and ethical decisions in community. All Christians live in pluralistic contexts. If a single Christian family is living in Saudi Arabia or Algeria, they are living in a multireligious context, and they will need to negotiate public morals and ethics. We make decisions for the welfare of society, as well as for the peace and justice of the public realm, *with* people of other faiths. How do our neighbors think about abortion, about war, about technology, about justice? This is often the strongest area for interreligious relationship, because Muslim and Christian mothers both want their young children to avoid drugs, violence, and premarital sex. Buddhist and Christian men are concerned about job security and medical bills. As we discuss these moral and ethical issues, we get back to the cause of beliefs and values, and when this happens we are getting closer to the Kingdom of God. Where there will be tension is when we talk about the degree of tolerance and pluralism that we will support. Do we wish to build a pluralistic, just, and harmonious society together? What about the *dhimmi* (non-Muslim protected community) and the *ummah* (Muslim community)? How can Christians live peaceably and faithfully when restrictions are put on practices that flow out of beliefs? This is one of the major issues today for Christian mission in Islamic contexts: is it possible to build a just society

together? There have been historic instances where Christians have lived in more-just Islamic realms, and there have been times when Christians lived in Muslim realms that have been deathly oppressive.

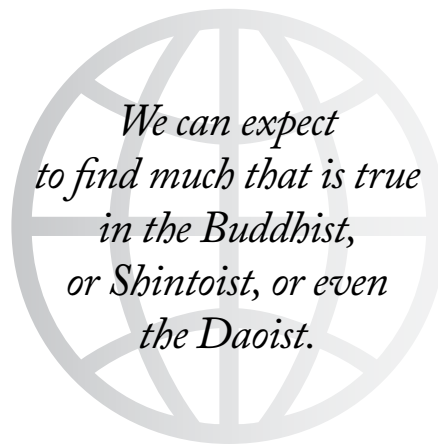
Evil

The topic of evil must come up at some point, and if it doesn't we need only read the front page of the morning paper. For some religious people, evil is not really so bad, it is simply not being quite good enough, sort of like not finishing your homework. For others, evil has personality and is constantly plotting to bring the downfall of people and nations. Along with this discussion will come the discussion of pain and suffering. Quite often interreligious discussions or relationships begin in pain: the death of a family member, a family tragedy, or a diagnosis of cancer. This is the time to listen carefully to how the person understands suffering, death, and the presence of evil. The first funeral I did was that of a young woman who committed suicide. She was the only Christian in a Buddhist family, and she killed herself over a broken heart. Not only was the family Buddhist, but they did not speak English, and I did not speak Mandarin. They had all types of questions—as did I. “Lord, why does my first funeral have to be a young woman, a suicide, and the only Christian in a Buddhist family?” Church members brought food to the family every night for two or three months. They stayed around the home, talking, praying, and listening. In the midst of all the discussions about evil and suffering, the family finally found comfort in Jesus Christ. The parents, siblings, and newborn nephew were all baptized the next year. This is not to say that all tragedies lead to God, but it does demonstrate that tragedies strip away our insulating comfort and expose us directly to the big problems in life. When this happens, people are often looking for a good shepherd.

Jesus

Jesus will eventually come up in a dialogue with people of other faiths. Most people are more interested in Jesus than they are in his followers, and that is a good thing. Christians who are struggling to be faithful to Jesus Christ will often do things that cause cognitive dissonance: “You took your vacation at a refugee camp in Iraq?” “You teach illegal immigrants to speak English every Friday night?” As a history professor in Shanghai, China, once said to his students, who were studying the history of missions in China,

If you want to understand why these Christian missionaries came all the way to China and worked so hard



to set up schools and hospitals, you have to study about Jesus. They are trying to follow Jesus.

So, when the time comes, it is important to be able to explain about Jesus—not as a doctrine, but as a person. “Read the Gospel of Mark, and tell me what you think.” Some religions have already pegged Jesus as a prophet (but the information about him in the Bible is not accurate), or as an avatar (a really good one, but one of many). They may disagree with your estimate of Jesus, but at some point in the dialogue you need to allow Jesus to speak.

Truth Claims

As a final issue, and as a type of catchall category, we relate to other religions on

the basis of their truth claims. Truth claims include what we say as well as how we judge truth from error. “Why do you say that?” will be asked time and again as we seek to understand truth claims from others. Some truth claims will never be harmonized; for example, either humans are creatures (created by God), or humans are part of God (Brahma). There is a world of difference between these two claims, and the closest we can get to harmonizing them is probably to talk about the *imago Dei* that is in each person. Other truth claims, once they are voiced, will draw us close together because all truth is God's truth. Thus we can expect to find much that is true in the Buddhist, or Shintoist, or even the Daoist. This is why we are discussing religions under the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit who placed the moral concern of honoring parents in the Confucianist's mind caused me to write the Ten Commandments on a piece of cardboard for my children many years ago. And so we read together: “Honor your father and your mother so that your days may be long . . .”

Theologies of Religion

This is not the place to review the theology of religions, but it is necessary to be able to think about religions theologically, and I still think the paradigm developed by David Bosch in the 1970s is the most helpful and one that best explains all the evidence.⁸ Before giving his Christian theology of religions, Bosch outlined the following earlier paradigms that have been present in the twentieth century:

1. Relativism: All religions are paths to the one truth. This is represented by Ernst Troeltsch, William Hocking, Paul Tillich, and William Cantwell Smith.
2. “Not to destroy but to fulfill”: This is represented by Georges Khodr, Kaj Baago, and J. N. Farquhar.
3. Revelation and religion in antithesis: This is represented by Karl Barth.

4. Abiding paradox: Christian faith and other religions. This is represented by Emil Brunner and Hendrik Kraemer.

Bosch then talks about the two lines of thought in the Bible that lead to opposite conclusions if they are not braided together. First is the universal line that points to God as Lord of all the nations and peoples. God's inclusion of other nations reveals his intent to include them in the future. The other line is exclusive, and this also is found throughout the Bible: "There is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). After discussing biblical passages related to the exclusive and inclusive view of people of other religions, Bosch gives his "Tripolar Christian Theology of Religions."

Most people doing theology of religions are working with two poles (good or evil; or religious consciousness of a person and a real revelation from God), or they are working with one pole ("religion emerges from within man himself"). Following Peter Beyerhaus, Bosch outlines the three poles involved in a Christian theology of religions in the following manner:

1. A person's *religious awareness* of, and concern for, God
2. God's involvement with humanity, through *revelation*
3. The sphere of *demonic* influence

A Christian theology of religion must take into account these three variables. Thus, we can understand any religion as these three working together in the mind of the individual and in the collective spirit of the culture or nation.

We can use this tripolar framework to understand Christianity as a religion. There are times that Christians are aware of God's revelation, and they receive it and follow it. At other times, they receive God's revelation, but they are also listening to the evil one, turning grace into law and freedom into servitude. Christians, under a demonic

Christians who do not have Christ are no different than the Hindu lying on a bed of nails to purify his thoughts and remove his sins.

influence, kill other Christians over the formulation of the Eucharist, and they have also tortured other Christians for false claims about being a witch. How do we make sense of the dark deeds that Christians have done without seeing something of the demonic at play? By the same token, we can make sense of other religions as also having an awareness of God's revelation, but as also listening at times to another voice that pulls them away from God. We have to be humble and cautious in thinking this way, for many people have caused great damage pointing the finger at a person or religion and calling it evil. That is not how this model is to be used. We use this model to make sense of the good that is in other religious people and the evil that we might find in the church, and vice versa. When Don Richardson discovered that the Dani of Papua had developed a central cultural value of treachery, he thought there was no way they could understand about Jesus: Judas was the real hero to the Dani. But, when he tried to end intertribal warfare, he learned about the culturally developed method of peace whereby the chief of one of the tribes gives his own child to the chief of the warring tribe. The child is raised, and lives his whole life, with the other tribe. As long as the child is alive, there is peace between the tribes. This "peace child" is just as important to the Dani as the value of treachery. In a sense, all religions have some treachery and some peace child. In interreligious dialogue, we hope to come to the point of being able to name the peace child—and then introduce him to the other.

The Holy Spirit and Religions: A Postscript

The great Indian evangelist and wandering monk Sadhu Sundar

Singh wrote a book with a memorable title: *With and Without Christ: Being Incidents Taken from the Lives of Christians and of Non-Christians which Illustrate the Difference in Lives Lived with Christ and Without Christ.*⁹ It is a fascinating little study on the difference Jesus makes in people's lives, whether they are called Christian or not. It is also interesting to find that those Christians who do not have Christ (we all have met them) are no different than the Hindu lying on a bed of nails to purify his thoughts and remove his sins. Following Jesus's lead, Sundar Singh explains that the poor and inadequate are more drawn to Jesus and follow Jesus more often than the rich and powerful.

As the magnet draws steel, not gold or silver, so the cross of Christ, draws sinners who truly repent and turn in their need to Him, but not those who trust in their own goodness and are satisfied to live without him.¹⁰

As early as the 1920s, Sundar Singh was aware of many Indians and Nepalese who were following Christ, but who were not identified as Christians. Today, we talk about unbaptized believers, secret believers, and even Muslim followers of Isa. Religious titles are less the issue than being marked with the cross (as our Indian woman was as a child). Those who have the Spirit, whose image of God is being refashioned or polished, will reflect Christ to others in all that they are. If they do not, if they resist that work of the Spirit, they are in fact "Christians without Christ." **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Stephen Goode, "Feminists' Crusade Sparks Holy War," BNet, CBS Interactive Business Network, accessed June 4, 2011, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1571/is_n30_v10/ai_15640006/.

²Used mostly in Hinduism, the meaning of the red dot, or *bindi*, is varied, but in all cases it carries religious meaning related to meditation, wisdom, and centering oneself (often meditating on a god or goddess or on the merits of the Buddha).

³Clifford Geertz (referring to Max Weber) writes of cultures as being webs of significance that we spin ourselves. I am applying the same concept to religion, because religion is at the core of cultural meaning. Geertz expressed it this way: “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expression on their surface enigmatical.” From Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

⁴From his last of his four Bampton Lectures (delivered in the fall of 1961), titled, “Christianity Judging Itself in the Light of Its Encounter with the World Religions,” published in *Christianity and the*

Encounter of World Religions (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 61.

⁵This is not a book primarily on religions, on the history of religions, or on witnessing to people of other faiths. There is a huge and, like the universe itself, constantly expanding corpus of material on these topics. I mention a few here by way of introduction. The best new Roman Catholic approach to religions is the *Catholic Engagement with World Religions: A Comprehensive Study*, ed. Karl J. Becker and Ilaria Morali (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010). An excellent volume that includes a survey of major scholars from an evangelical perspective is that of Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003). A creative and fair approach to religions for Christian mission is done by Terry Muck and Frances S. Adeney, *Christianity Encountering World Religions: The Practice of Mission in the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009). Paul Knitter’s *No Other Name: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985) is one of the most well-reasoned from a progressive perspective.

⁶We can actually say that dialogue with the other will bring about conversion, if we are listening carefully—if we mean by this conversion to a deeper understanding of God. This is what I mean by sanctification.

⁷Contra John Hick, who, speaking about the afterlife, said: “Whether it involves continued separate individuality we do not know and we ought not to care. Sufficient that, whatever its nature, our destiny will be determined by the goodness of God.” He then quotes from John Robinson’s book *But That I Can’t Believe!*: “Death may be the end. So what? . . . Nothing turns on what happens after death.” From John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Oxford: One World Publications, 1993), 186. See chap. 10 for a larger discussion of salvation and religious pluralism.

⁸*Theology of Religions* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1977). This volume was designed as a study guide for the Department of Missiology and Science of Religion at the University of South Africa.

⁹Sadhu Sundar Singh, *With and Without Christ* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1929).

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 75.

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