Christianity and World Religions: 
Is there a relationship between our theology and practice?

Issue 32 Editor: Kang-San Tan

It is difficult to think of a more important question facing Christianity in the twenty first century than its relationship with world religions. The future of Christianity will depend in part on her ability to engage meaningfully and missionally with the growing religious plurality of our world.

We begin, therefore, with a survey of current theologies of religion by Robert Dutch, a staff member of Bristol Baptist College and a postgraduate student at Redcliffe College doing the MA in Intercultural Studies in Asian Contexts. His article provides a useful map for connecting our religious interactions and evangelistic practices with certain theological approaches toward the religions.

In assessing the religious beliefs of our neighbours, we need to present careful and responsible treatments rather than caricatures and superficial dismissals. How do we assess religious beliefs that are foreign to Christianity? Using the criteria of scripture, tradition, reason and experience, Rob Cook, Head of Theology at Redcliffe College, offers a critique of the Hindu concept of Reincarnation.

While Western theologies are accustomed to engaging with Western philosophies, Christians in Asia are also engaging with Asian religious worldviews. In the next article, Christina Manohar, formerly a Lecturer in Systematic Theology at Union Biblical Seminary, Pune, and currently a Visiting Lecturer on Hinduism at Redcliffe College, develops a Christian understanding of the Spirit in conversation with Upanishad, the Hindu scriptures. Can Christians use non Christian religious sources to develop distinctive Christian theologies?

Religious encounters are not purely 'religious', nor are they primarily between monolithic religious systems. In "Sheik-ing our Towers of Faith", Andy Kingston-Smith, Lecturer in Mission at Redcliffe, offers a personal observation of the clash of cultures between the West and Christian culture, and the Middle East (specifically Dubai) and Islam.

The combination of articles in this issue, while not exhaustive, should raise many challenging questions, as well as offering some trajectories toward the future of Christianity's engagement with world religions. Please join the conversation by give us your critiques, comments and questions!

Kang-San

Kang-San Tan is Head of Mission Studies at Redcliffe College and Editor of Encounters.
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(Dr Robert Dutch, 4320 words, pdf 116 KB)

• **Article 2:** What's Wrong with Reincarnation?  
(Dr Rob Cook, 2128 words, pdf 36 KB)

• **Article 3:** The Indwelling of the Spirit: A Hindu-Christian reflection.  
(Dr Christina Manohar, 5640 words, pdf 205 KB)

• **Article 4:** Sheik-ing the Towers of Faith.  
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• **Book Review:** Total Abandon.  
(by Gary Witherall with Elizabeth Cody Newenhuys)

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A Survey of Current Theologies of Religion

Author: Dr Robert Dutch, Bristol Baptist College.

1. Introduction

Andrew Kirk (1999:118) remarks, ‘Of all the topics encompassed by the study of mission none is more fundamental and controversial than the relation between Christian and non-Christian faiths’. Moreover, David Bosch (1991:477) calls the theologia religionum (‘theology of religions’) ‘the epitome of mission theology’, noting that the theology of religions has dominated missiological studies from the 1960s. The Roman Catholic missiologists Bevans and Schroeder (2004:254) concur, ‘The most challenging question facing the church and mission at the end of the twentieth century, within both Catholicism and Protestantism, was the question of the relationship of Christianity and other religions, and this continues to be the case today.’ Similarly, Perry Schmidt-Leukel (2009) considers ‘theology of religions’ a necessary task when seriously engaging with non-Christian religions. Also, the evangelical scholars Kang-San Tan (2000) and Miriam Adeney (2005) agreed on the foundational importance of a theology of religions in an Asian mission context. This essay, therefore, addresses primary, not peripheral, issues.

First, the essay addresses Christ’s uniqueness in a pluralistic world from the traditional Christian understanding of uniqueness and then considers the pluralist, inclusivist and exclusivist perspectives. The views of representative scholars are described and evaluated. Second, the essay evaluates the threefold typology for theologies of religion by examining arguments for/against the typology. Proposed replacements for the classical typology are examined. A conclusion summarises the terrain covered.

The position adopted follows Tiessen (2004) with a Western evangelical stance and critical realism as the approach to truth. The southward shift of Christianity is recognised (Ott and Netland 2006) and that religious plurality, recent in the West, has been ‘a long-standing issue in Asia’ (Tan 2000). Theology of religions is complex, challenging and contested.

2. The Uniqueness of Christ in a Pluralistic World

2.1 Orthodox Christianity: Historical Priority

Bosch’s (1991) developing missionary paradigms up to the present ‘shifting scene’ demonstrates that until the eighteenth century there was a ‘collective certitude’ in the church from the Middle Ages that has now vanished. The Enlightenment paradigm, expecting religions to disappear, was wrong and religious resurgence is evident. Such circumstances, according to Bosch (1991:476-477), present the church with ‘totally unprecedented challenges’. Two problems needing solving are the church’s relationship (1) to world views which offer this-worldly salvation, and (2) to other faiths. The second one, a ‘theology of religions’ is at the heart of mission theology and discussions in the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. Previously, the Catholic model saw salvation only available inside the church (extra ecclesiam nulla salus) - while Protestants saw salvation as only available through the Word.

Similarly, Netland (2001) observes that traditionally Christians taught God’s unique revelation through the Scriptures and in Christ’s incarnation. Therefore, ‘sinful humanity can be reconciled to God only through the sinless person and atoning work of Jesus Christ, the one Lord and Savior for all people in all cultures’ (2001:24). For twenty centuries this was orthodox Christian teaching, rooted in the New Testament (and its pluralistic world).
Belief in Christ as the only Saviour and Christianity as the true religion was foundational for the modern missionary movements. However, Netland (2001 and 2004) observes, in the last fifty years rapid and radical change occurred in Europe and North America. Through secularisation, globalisation and changing demographics the West's population has experienced growing diversity. However, Ramachandra (2008) shows, for example, that the sixteenth-century English were not ignorant of Islam. Trade, alliances and negotiations were common for 'The English might have their reservations about Islam, but these were nothing compared to their hatred and fear of "popery".' He notes the West's 'historical amnesia'.

Today, Christianity's uniqueness claims are challenged. Christianity is universal and particular (centred in Jesus' uniqueness) but, 'This understanding of the gospel, however, is regarded by many as not only intellectually untenable but also morally unacceptable in a diverse world' (Netland 2001:13). Christian claims are declared arrogant and dogmatic (Newbigin 1989). What has changed?

2.2 Emerging Pluralism and a Pluralistic World

Newbigin (1989) observes that modern Britain is a ‘plural society’ with three pluralisms: ideological, cultural and religious. Cultural pluralism cherishes diverse cultures/life-styles. However, religious pluralism 'is the belief that the differences between the religions are not a matter of truth and falsehood, but of different perceptions of the one truth; that to speak of religious belief as true or false is inadmissible'(1989:14). Uniqueness claims for Jesus and salvation conflict with society's ‘plausibility structures’. Pluralism is, says Newbigin (1989:156), ‘the contemporary orthodoxy’. Netland (2001) also recognises 'shifting perspectives on other religions' challenge to orthodox Christianity. In this context, scholars hold diverse religious views.

2.3 The Threefold Typology and Uniqueness


2.3.1 Pluralism

Netland (2001) observes that pluralism recognises that salvation (or its equivalent) is available in each religion and no religion is superior or normative for they all offer a route(s) to the divine reality. Christianity is not unique and normative for all humankind although Christians may consider it so for themselves. Religious pluralism is particularly associated with John Hick and Paul Knitter, e.g. The Myth of Christian Uniqueness (1987). D'Costa (2009) observes ‘three varieties’: unitary pluralists (e.g. John Hick and Terry Schmidt-Leukel), pluriform pluralists (e.g. Raimundo Panikkar and Mark Heim), and ethical pluralists (e.g. Paul Knitter).

D'Costa (2009:6) notes unitary pluralists hold ‘that all religions are, or can be, equal and valid paths to the one divine reality ... a single unitary divine being behind the different plural religious phenomena.’ Pluriform pluralists recognize ‘different paths to different plural divine realities’ while ethical pluralists ‘hold that all religions are related to the divine insomuch as they contain certain ethical codes and practices, and religions should not be judged according to the conceptual pictures of divine reality they profess’ (2009:6). Despite differences, e.g. Heim (1995) is critical of Hick’s pluralism and argues for multiple salvations.
or religious ends, their common ground is that Christ is only one revelation among many valid revelations. Traditional understanding of Christ’s uniqueness is redefined.

D’Costa (2009) notes Hick argued against a traditional Christian teaching on *solus Christus* or Christ-centered (or *Christocentric*) salvation, or church-centered (or *ecclesiocentric*) approach, and for a God-centered (or *theocentric*) understanding. In religions, God is the centre not Christ. Hick argues that Christ’s incarnation is not literal but ‘mythically’ or metaphorical which is ‘as an expression of devotion and commitment by Christians, not as an ontologically claim, about the unique and exclusive action of God in this particular man, Jesus’ (D’Costa 2009:9). In ‘The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity’ Hick (1987:31-32) calls this ‘inspiration christology’ and argues it occurs in many different people. Jesus is not unique. In response to criticisms that his *theocentric* position excluded the non-theistic religions, Hick changed from God to ‘noumenal Real’ or Reality centeredness.

Exclusivists and inclusivists critique pluralism and defend Christ’s uniqueness/universality, e.g. Carson (1996), Chung (2005), D’Costa (1990, 1993, 2009), Fernando (2005), Geivett and Phillips (1995), Nazir-Ali (2008), Netland (2001) and Sinkinson (2001). In particular, Western authors have defended ‘the conceptual role of truth’ but Tan (2000:303) observes Asian Christians have ‘a more functional concept of truth’, i.e. the way truth is communicated is also essential. In pluralism, conflicting truth claims are often inadequately addressed, e.g. did Jesus die on the cross (Christians) or not (Muslims) (Parrinder 1982)? Pluralists often compromise the authority/integrity of the Scriptures (Kuschel 1997) and reduce religions to the lowest common denominator which believers reject.

Beaumont (2005:158) notes that the Muslim scholar Muzzammil H. Siddiqi ‘has two problems with Hick’s enthusiasm for pluralism. Firstly, Hick does not make room for revelation, and, secondly, Hick thinks different belief systems are equally valid.’ Sinkinson (2001) rightly objects to Hick’s model of revelation and his Ultimate Reality as an ‘unknown god.’ Hick’s pluralism rejects Christ’s uniqueness and our knowledge of God as Trinity. Furthermore, Knitter’s claim that ‘pluralistic theology’ is the only basis for dialogue with world religions is rebuffed by Moltmann (1990:155) who remarks ‘A pluralistic theology of religions can be no less imperialistic than the Christian theologies that Knitter wants to overcome.’ Finally, for evangelicals, Tan (2000) remarks ‘Commitment to the God revealed in Scripture means Christ becomes the model for approaching people of other faiths’ and their high Christology does not compromise uniqueness.

### 2.3.2 Inclusivism

Inclusivism, a position advocated by some evangelicals, is a broad/ambiguous category. Clark Pinnock ably summarises his view in Okholm and Phillips (1995) as a cautious inclusivist as distinct from a ‘less cautious inclusivist’ (e.g. Rahner’s ‘anonymous Christian’). Pinnock accepts that God may work in other religions but does not recognise them as salvific. Netland (2001) notes inclusivists’ three principles: (a) Christ is unique and normative to other religious leaders and provides salvation, (b) Salvation, based on Christ, is available through other religions and (c) these are positive and within God’s purpose. Strange (2002:38-39) defines inclusivism as ‘Christ is *ontologically* necessary for salvation but not *epistemologically* necessary’ but he forcefully argues, from his Reformed position, against Pinnock’s inclusivism.

Sennett (2005), hoping to allay unfounded evangelical fears over inclusivism, argues for a ‘bare bones inclusivism’ similar to Pinnock’s ‘cautious’/‘modal’ inclusivism but more cautious, arguing from Romans 1:20. His ‘bare bones inclusivism’ abstains from commenting on truth/grace in non-Christian religions (although rejecting pluralism), but accepts the special/general revelation distinction and considers the salvation of the ‘unevangelised’. Using philosophical theology, Sennett argues ‘that the condemnation of the unevangelised is
justified only if they have not responded appropriately to general revelation’ (2005:319). He wisely recognises that Hick (1995a) will remain dissatisfied for he wants exclusivists/inclusivists to become pluralists.

Nevertheless, Sennett, like many scholars, fails to define ‘salvation’. Does he mean eschatological salvation, present salvation (1 Cor 1:18) or both? Are unevangelised Muslims who respond ‘appropriately to general revelation’ saved and in what sense? Adeney’s (2001) contextual study argues that Islam fails to provide a nurturing context for discipling Muslim-Background believers. Also, Gnanakan (2001), while appreciating her contribution, asks how we measure discipleship and whether Jesus’ community is wider than the church community. Yong (2003:107) sensibly wants to move inclusivism ‘from abstract theology to more concrete empirical analysis and engagement with the world of religions’.

David Cheetham (2008) shows ‘inclusivisms’ exist, while D’Costa (2009:7) identifies two types: structural inclusivists and restrictive inclusivists. Structural inclusivists see Christ as God’s ‘normative revelation’ but this salvation is available through other religions but only based on Christ. Restrictive inclusivists, e.g. Pinnock (1995), see Christ as God’s ‘normative revelation’ but this does not legitimate other religions as salvific although salvation is available outside the church. D’Costa (2009:7) summarizes, ‘In both, Christ is ontologically and causally exclusive to salvation but not necessarily epistemologically.’ He sees this as solus Christus but not fides ex auditu. Inclusivists retain an orthodox view of Christ’s uniqueness against pluralists. However, Stackhouse (2001:196) rightly argues that the epistemological/ontological distinction is insufficient for believers must believe ‘something about someone (who is God) in order for the fundamental direction of her faith to be properly orientated and fruitful. An epistemologically (or “cognitively”) empty faith is inconceivable.’ A saving faith requires specific content.

Inclusivism has merit in not restricting God’s action to the church and recognising God’s Spirit operates in other religions. Adeney (2001) relates to non-Christian religions positively explaining she has learnt from Buddhists, Confucians, animists and Muslims. Similarly, Tan (2000:302) recognises ‘many things about life and God ... can be learned from non-believers and other religions.’ Moreover, Parshall’s (2003) church planting spectrum (C-scale) demonstrates contextualization controversies and secret believers remaining ‘Muslim’ (not in the visible church). Finally, McDermott’s (2007) investigation of the Bible and early church theologians regarding ‘the scandal of particularity’ concludes that God permitted religions, using truth in them to prepare cultures/individuals to receive the gospel while also teaching the church.

2.3.3 Exclusivism

Exclusivism is the ‘default’ condition for evangelicals (Sennett 2005) and the church’s traditional perspective. [1] Netland (2001:48) identifies exclusivism’s broad principles: (1) the Bible as God’s full revelation, (2) Christ as God’s unique incarnation who alone provides salvation and (3) God’s salvation is unavailable through other religions. This theological exclusivism leaves open other issues where evangelicals disagree.

D’Costa (2009:7) identifies two types: restrictive-access exclusivists and universal-access exclusivists. Restrictive-access exclusivists believe ‘God is exclusively revealed in Jesus Christ solus Christus’ and they restrict salvation to the elect. Universal-access exclusivists accept the exclusivity claim but anyone hearing the gospel and professing Christ can be saved. This confession can be in this life, at the time of death (Tiessen 2004) or post-mortem (D’Costa 2009).

Against the World Council of Churches’ liberalism, evangelicals have issued declarations on Christ’s uniqueness, e.g. the Frankfurt Declaration (1970) and Lausanne Covenant (1974). The Manila Declaration (1992) ‘The Unique Christ in Our Pluralistic World’ expresses the
‘heart of particularism’ (Netland 2001). For example, ‘Against ... pluralism, we affirm that God has acted decisively, supremely, and normatively in the historical Jesus of Nazareth’ (Gnanakan 1995:305).

However, exclusivist attitudes to unbelievers/non-Christian religions have produced resentment in Postcolonialism (Pui-Ian 2000) and pluralism (Hick 1987). In countries where ancestor practices are important dogmatic assertions that ancestors are lost because they did not confess Christ are unwelcome and damaging. [2] Gnanakan (2001:186) rightly requests a humble biblical and contextual review of the ‘hard-line exclusivist position’ particularly on heaven/hell since he is bothered by ‘the arrogant certainty most evangelicals seem to display in answering questions beyond our knowledge.’ Evangelicals need to engage in interreligious dialogue/study (not fearing syncretism) and not compromising their biblical faith (Tan 2005).

2.3.4 Universalism

Universalists occur in the three categories. D’Costa (2009) remarks that Barth, Rahner and Hick (respectively: exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist) are universalists. While Rahner has a hope, Barth and Hick express certainty for the world’s salvation.

Tiessen (2004:486) notes ‘Universalism asserts that every human being will finally be saved’. However, this salvation, irrespective of personal faith, or none, is attained by all people through Christ’s redemptive work. Hille (2007) observes salvation is offered by grace and ultimately imparted irrespective of personal acceptance of Christ. Christ’s work is unique ontologically but not epistemologically necessary. Those believing in this life will be saved and unbelievers are saved post-mortem. Universalism rests on two main attributes of God: omnipotence and love. The proof-text is 1 Tim 2:3-4. God’s universal will to save cannot be thwarted by sin/evil.

Talbott (1999) argues, from the Scriptures, for universalism as against annihilation or unending conscious punishment. Although assuming Christ’s uniqueness, he does not discuss the threefold typology/theology of religions. Talbott believes all people will be saved through Christ after an undefined period in hell. Similarly, Parry and Partridge (2003) argue for universalism.

J.I. Packer (1990) argues against universalism. Similarly, the Manila Declaration (1992) rejected universalism as unbiblical (Gnanakan 1995). However, although Strange (2002:31) rejects universalism as a ‘credible option for evangelicals’ MacDonald’s Evangelical Universalist makes his case as ‘a hopeful dogmatic universalist’ (2008:4). Whereas ‘hopeful universalists’ hope, from Scripture, that God will save everyone they are not certain. Christian ‘dogmatic universalists’ are certain that God will save everybody. MacDonald is not ‘100% certain that it is correct’, hence he is ‘a hopeful dogmatic universalist’. He rejects Hick’s pluralist universalism as unbiblical and marginalizing Christ’s unique salvific role, arguing instead for a Christian universalism. MacDonald’s universalism does not undermine evangelism or the motive for mission and evangelical universalists are expected to foster ‘a mission-focused spirituality’ (2008:172). Many evangelicals will remain unconvinced.

3. Evaluation of the Threefold Typology/Theology of Religions

3.1 Defending the Typology

The Western typology is widely usage. The evangelical exclusivist Strange (2002:15) sees the typology ‘as three points of reference on a wide spectrum’ and so works within the typology in challenging Pinnock’s inclusivism. However, Strange also develops his own
useful categories for a more nuanced understanding of inclusivism. Kärkkäinen (2003:24) considers the typology as having ‘the potential of becoming the typology of theology of religions’ but then constructs another typology (see below).

Hedges (2008) has ably defended the classical typology answering objections that: (a) it misconstrues religious diversity; (b) there are more, or less, categories; (c) categories are incoherent; (d) it is unable to handle the various positions held, and (d) the terms are polemic. He sees good reasons for continuing Race’s original classification since it provides a ‘useful framework’ in which other approaches can be located. Hedges (2008:27) sees the threefold category as ‘fluid categories with permeable membranes’ and not straightjackets. The typologies are: descriptive, heuristic, multivalent, and permeable. They are not ‘prescriptive, normative, defining and closed’ (2008:27). However, when the former supporter D’Costa (2009) has lost faith in the typology Hedges is fighting an uphill battle.

Hedges rightly agrees with plural categories: ‘exclusivisms-inclusivisms-pluralisms’. However, his arguments are not completely persuasive for while defending the threefold category he challenges it! He adds ‘particularities’ to form a fourfold category: ‘exclusivisms-inclusivisms-pluralisms-particularities’ and considers ‘femininism’ as a paradigm, from Jeannine Hill Fletcher (2008:30). She persuasively argues for a feminist rethink of the current boundaries since ‘few feminist theologians have constructed a systematic theology of religions’ (2008:136).

A further defence of the threefold category is its global use. For example, Ramachandra (1996) uses it to critique the pluralist Asian theologians Stanley Samartha, Aloysius Pieris and Raimundo Panikkar, and How Chuang Chua (2007) supports Ramachandra. Moreover, Ashk Dahlén (2006) addresses religious pluralism in Iran asking if among Muslim intellectuals ‘Abd al-Karim Surush is the John Hick of Iran. Dahlén’s philosophical and theological debate uses the threefold typology. Similarly, Robertson (2009) in Dharma Deepika writes a defence of religious pluralism in South Asia, inter-religious relations and global ethics while engaging with Western/non-Western theologians. The typology is not restricted to the West.

3.2 Critiquing the Typology

3.2.1 General Remarks

The threefold typology is under attack. Okholm and Phillips (1995:16) note ‘the label exclusive is so prejudicial that it precedes true dialogue’. Rejecting also its prejudicial synonym restrictivism they choose particularism. Similarly, Kirk criticises its negative category connotations, noting ‘exclusivism’ appears narrow-minded, ‘pluralism’ suggests ‘lack of concern’ while ‘inclusivism’ seems open-minded (1999:127-128). He chooses particularity, generality and universality. Netland (2001:46-48) replaces exclusivism with particularism. Previously, he used the threefold category but now finds fault with the taxonomy for obscuring ‘subtle, but very significant, difference among positions and thinkers’ (2001:47). Nevertheless, he concludes, ‘with proper qualification the three categories can be useful tools for helping to sort out various perspectives on other religions’ (2001:48). In contrast, Hick (1995b:246) calls ‘particularism’ a meaningless term since ‘everything is particular’. Moreover, Heim (1995:4) argues the typology can ‘seriously mislead us’ since its coherence works from ‘the assumption that salvation is an unequivocal, single reality’ which he challenges. McDermott (2007:23) states ‘the typology has collapsed’.

Kärkkäinen (2003) replaces the classic category with: ecclesiocentrism, Christocentrism, theocentrism, and Realitycentrism. The supposed gain is showing the recent dynamic movement in thinking from ecclesiocentrism towards Realitycentrism. However, this appears
to offer little but a renamed original, as Hedges (2008) observes. Hedges (2008) has also evaluated typologies by Schmidt-Leukel, Knitter and Thomas plus the ‘comparative theology’ approach. This demonstrates the substantial interest in developing relevant categories for a theology of religions. However, limited space prevents further discussion.

D’Costa (2009:34-35) critiques the typology for two main reasons: (1) its failure to precisely ‘deliver’ on the unbelievers’ salvation, and (2) all three positions are exclusivist. He suggests ‘a seven-graded classification’ on how someone is saved, distinguishing between ‘the means and the goal of salvation.’ These means/goals are: trinity-centered, Christ-centered, Spirit-centered, church-centered, theocentric, reality-centered and ethics-centered. Whether this classification is accepted by scholars is an open question but it looks a useful way forward.

Moreover, Tan (2007:384) notes the categories are too sharp, lacking complexity and nuance e.g. some evangelicals while exclusive on Jesus’ salvation accept insights from non-Christian religions. Consequently, he introduces new models with Tiessen’s five categories and Hans Frei’s five-type typology. These are explained next.

### 3.2.2 Tiessen’s Categories

Tiessen criticises the threefold typology and proposes five clear categories: ‘ecclesiocentrism, agnosticism, accessibilism, religious instrumentalism and relativism’ (2004:32). Tiessen intentionally incorporates Yong’s (2003) observation that the category ‘exclusivism’ addresses the unevangelised but is not particularly suited to addressing issues in the theology of religions.

Tiessen’s categories ecclesiocentrism, agnosticism, accessibilism concern the unevangelised while his other two (religious instrumentalism and relativism) address the theology of religions. His categories are more nuanced than the threefold category while recognising two important distinctions: the unevangelised and non-Christian religions. Importantly, the first four categories affirm Christ’s uniqueness for salvation and the first three agree that non-Christian religions are not salvific.

Ecclesiocentrists contend that accessibility to salvation is only available to those hearing the gospel, although Tiessen adds, ‘at least in the case of competent adults’ (2004:33). [3] Agnosticism admits ignorance on the fate of the unevangelised since Scripture is silent. Accessibilists, however, understand that God works beyond the church so, contra ecclesiocentrists, there is salvation outside its boundaries. God makes salvation accessible to the unevangelised but the non-Christian religions are not salvific. Potential for confusion exists here. Tiessen admits that his category accessibilism is considered by many evangelicals as inclusivist (a term Tiessen deliberately avoids). However, Tiessen makes his position clear, ‘accessibilists believe that God may save people who are members of other religions, but religious instrumentalists believe that God has raised up those religions as his instruments in salvation’ (2004:33).

Tiessen’s fourth category religious instrumentalism, recognises Christ’s uniqueness but accepts that non-Christian religions are salvific. This category matches some definitions of inclusivism, e.g. Netland (1991) and Carson (1996). Finally, relativism teaches that Christ is not the only saviour and salvation is available through non-Christian religions. This is pluralism in the threefold scheme but Tiessen avoids ‘pluralism’ because of ambiguity. Both religious instrumentalism and relativism focus on the theology of religions while accessibilism also permits engagement with non-Christian religions. Tiessen’s categories are much more nuanced than the threefold scheme.
3.2.3 Hans Frei's Types

Tan (2007) argues for contextual reformation, with non-Christian religions being approached on their own terms, rather than via traditional evangelical categories (which need transformation). He illustrates this with Malaysian Christian-Muslim relations. Moreover, Tan proposes Frei and Hunsburger's (1992) five types of theology as fruitful for developing ‘a more critical evaluation of approaches towards non-Christian religions’ (2007:386). Frei’s approach arose from dissatisfaction with insufficient nuance in the pluralism and exclusivism categories. Tan (2007) notes that this led evangelicals to withdraw from engagement with non-Christian religions but the new typology offers a spectrum based on Christianity’s relationship with modernism rather than traditional approaches (e.g. evangelical and liberal).

Two polarities exist in Frei’s typology: Type 1 and Type 5. Type 1 develops theology from modern philosophy, the Enlightenment and various agenda. It is essentially pluralistic without biblical/Christian roots. In contrast, Type 5 builds a worldview on Scripture for encountering non-Christian religions. Here Western Christian categories drive the un-nuanced discussion with other religions (e.g. Islam). Contextualisation is ignored. For example, Type 5 is frequently held by fundamentalist communities. Between these extremes Type 2-4 communities provide better foundations for addressing the theology of religion. Type 2 permits interaction between Christian theology and modern sciences/theories, and studying non-Christian religions. However, Tan recognises that some adopted agendas (e.g. dialogue or pluralism) set an ‘integrative framework’ for encountering non-Christian peoples but the result is ‘minimum engagement with Scripture’ (2007:386).

The central position (Type 3) recognises that multi-perspectives are needed and not an overarching agenda. Engagement with non-Christian religions requires understanding particular religions in-depth. Tan (2007:387) notes ‘the key issue is correlation’ – connecting Christian faith and understanding people of other faiths (e.g. Christian salvation with nirvana). Religion, culture, social context and gospel are considered. There is no inhibiting ‘meta-narrative’. Tan rightly recognises that detailed knowledge and in-depth study of non-Christian religions will give ‘evangelicals a reliable position to make judgements, to come up with truth-validations, and to allow the Christian gospels interaction with any contradictory truths’ (2007:387). Type 3, Tan suggests, could include the Roman Catholic D’Costa and the accessibilists Tiessen and Newbigin. Finally, Type 4 avoids correlation while prioritising Christian narrative. From its Scriptural/gospel roots it seeks to understand other faiths including dialogue. It appears suitable for mainstream evangelicals. Thus Frei’s typology has considerable merit. However, two other positions need consideration.

3.2.4 Feminist Theology of Religions

Hedges (2008) suggests a feminist contribution. Historically, North American feminist scholars were outspoken (e.g. against patriarchy) with important contributions, e.g. Schüssler Fiorenza (1983) and Newsom and Ringe (1998). However, Western feminist discourse of ‘women’s experience’ is non-representative of tricontinental women and Young (2003) suggests tricontinental feminism needs constructing. Similarly, Hill Fletcher (2008:136) observes, ‘Few feminist theologians have constructed a systematic theology of religions.’ Moreover, many ‘feminist approaches ... lean in a theologically liberal direction toward pluralism’ (2008:144). Fabella (1993) develops a pluralist Christology. Chung Hyun Kyung (1993) discusses traditional/new images of Jesus for Asian women and Pui-Ian (2000:78) asserts ‘the myth of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ fuels Christian triumphalism and exclusivity.’ An evangelical feminist theology of religions should be developed.
3.2.5 Pneumatological and Trinitarian Theology of Religions

Finally, Yong (2001 and 2003) proposes a pneumatological paradigm focusing on the Spirit. However, Kärkkäinen (2003 and 2006), although initially receptive, questions this approach and proposes five guidelines. Kärkkäinen (2004 and 2006) offers a valuable way forward through trinitarian theology critiquing pluralism, recognising the triune God as unique, the relationship between Christology/Trinity and dialogue. Any changes in categories should be capable of incorporating Kärkkäinen’s developing contribution.

4. Conclusions

This essay uses a Western evangelical and critical realist stance to investigate the theology of religions which recognising Christianity’s southward shift. First, it demonstrated the importance modern scholarship attaches to understanding Christ’s uniqueness in a pluralistic world. Beginning with historic orthodox Christianity it showed the development of religious pluralism and critically engaged with the pluralist, inclusivist and exclusivist categories and universalism. Second, it evaluated the threefold category in terms of its retention or rejection. Tiessen’s and Frei’s category-proposals were considered. Finally, feminism, pneumatological and trinitarian proposals were introduced. It has demonstrated that the theology of religions is complex, challenging and contested but Christians must sensitivity engage with it in modern missions.

Notes

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What’s Wrong with Reincarnation?

Author: Dr Rob Cook, Head of Theology, Redcliffe College.

Amongst the human race there is a pretty strong vote in favour of reincarnation. To begin with it seems to be a recurring, if minor, theme in primal religion. Indeed, close to home for me, Caesar reported it as an element of the religion of the Druids in his *Gallic Wars*. It is, of course, central to the Eastern religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and then later, Sikhism. Possibly through the influence of the East, reincarnation (metempsychosis) was taught by the Orphics, Pythagoras, Empedocles and Plato and on through the Neo-Platonists and the Manicheans. It is found in the more esoteric schools of Judaism (certain Kabbalists) and Islam (e.g. the Druze sect). Occasionally it has also featured in Christian heretical groups such as the Cathars in thirteenth century France. In Europe, Kant, Goethe, and Schopenhauer flirted with it and, in our own day, it is commonplace amongst those influenced by New Age thought; New Age itself having been influenced by Theosophy and Anthroposophy. In fact I have heard of ‘come as you were’ fancy dress parties and of latter-day hippies proclaiming that they are ‘born again, born again Krishnas’!

Yet the orthodox Christian verdict on reincarnation has been a resounding veto. To sketch out why I will employ the epistemological tools of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience.

**Scripture**

Quite simply, massaging texts as one may, the Bible cannot sensibly be made to teach reincarnation, indeed the evidence points the other way (e.g. ‘it is appointed for man to die once...’ Heb. 9.27).

Nevertheless there are two passages that proponents regularly press into service. Firstly they claim that John the Baptist was a reincarnation of Elijah since Jesus explicitly stated, ‘if you are willing to accept it, he [John] is Elijah’ (Matt. 11.14). This is in spite of John denying it (Jn. 1.21), the reasoning being that Jesus, as an ascended master, could discern past lives in a way that the person concerned could not. But this won’t do. According to Scripture, Elijah never died (2 King. 2.11) and no one confused him with John the Baptist when he appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17). It is much better to understand Jesus’ words symbolically. As prophesied to John’s father, John would come ‘in the spirit and power of Elijah’ (Lk. 1.17) in fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy (Mal. 4.5).

The second text is more intriguing: John 9.1-3 where the disciples asked if the man born blind had sinned, the implication being to advocates of reincarnation that the disciples assumed that the malady might have been due to a fault in a previous life. Evidently they could be on to something here. There are some references to rebirth in Zoroastrianism and also in Mithraism and other mystery religions which might have seeped into Hellenistic Judaism. But there are two other possibilities. Perhaps, like Origen a little later, through Hellenistic influence they simply believed in the pre-existence of the soul, or again they perhaps believed that a baby could sin in the womb (this is known to have been taught by some rabbis in the second and third century CE). However that may be, the important point is that Jesus failed to endorse any of the above and simply stated that the man had not so sinned.

As has often been observed, the Eastern view of life and history as cyclic is foreign to Scripture where both are seen as part of a linear story. What is more, our destiny is not the
inexorable result of the outworking of personal *karma* according to the Bible but rather God wants to cut away this crippling burden through forgiveness and grace.

**Tradition**

It has been claimed that some of the Church Fathers believed in reincarnation but this is false. For example, they mistake Origen’s belief in the pre-existence of the soul with an endorsement of rebirth while he simply espoused the Platonic notion of a heavenly prior existence of the soul. Indeed he explicitly denounced metempsychosis in his writing as did many other Fathers who were fighting against the heresies of Gnosticism. The reasons they gave are interesting and include: our lack of previous life memories (e.g. Tertullian, Irenaeus), the problem of ongoing identity from one life to another (e.g. Tertullian) and the absurdity of being born an animal (e.g. Gregory of Nyssa). The same issues trouble present day philosophers as we shall see shortly. In the sixth century the Church formally anathematized Origen’s view which was described as ‘the fabulous pre-existence of souls’ and I suppose this would implicitly cover all reincarnationist teachings as well.

**Reason**

Some criticisms are culture-specific. For instance, there is the problem of how perfect shards (*atman*) of God could ever develop negative karma according to Advaita Hinduism as well as the futility of the whole process whereby the end is merely a return to the beginning – the shards simply reuniting with God (*Brahman*) after myriads of rebirths into suffering; nothing is lost but nothing is gained. Or again there is the problem of ongoing identity in the worldview of Theravada Buddhism with its rejection of a substantial soul. The being who inherits my *karma* shares neither my memories nor any of my essence (soul) since essence itself is illusory. Surely, therefore, according to this worldview there is no hope for me beyond death. Buddhist rebirth becomes a vapid concept.

Other criticisms are more generic. Let me mention seven of them:

1. How can simple life-forms such as beetles or indeed trees make mistakes leading to bad *karma*? Beetles may even lack consciousness, much less free-will. I once met a *guru* who claimed when in deep meditation to be able to review all his past lives since he was a stone but how can a stone be good/bad, or alive/dead come to that?!

2. For *karma* to be educational one would need to remember and thus be able to learn from mistakes made in previous lives but we have no such recall.

3. There is the problem of identity. If my memories are not transferred to the new self, and character disposition is so vague and general a notion, what actually of me is reborn?

4. General free-will vitiates the outworking of *karma*. Just as I am free to help or harm others, so they are free regarding their treatment of me. My good *karma* may entail that I should have a happy life but someone may nevertheless choose to persecute and harm me.

5. Given the experience of progressively more lives one would expect the human race to be improving morally overall but such evidence is surely lacking.

6. Genetics seems to point away from reincarnation. Lamarck was wrong in suggesting that events and developments in this life could be passed on to the next. If I cut off a finger my child will not be born with four digits. If I do a languages degree my child will not be born with an unusual propensity for language learning. Genetics insists that the information flow is always one way only – from the genes to the organism. But reincarnation assumes that information travels via *karma* from the life-choices of the
organism (person) to something like the genes of the reincarnated self. If biology teaches that this cannot happen between me and my child, *a fortiori* it cannot occur between me and some non-related future self.

7. Then there are moral problems. There is a Hindu proverb, ‘One man is borne aloft in a litter, four men sweat at the pole. What can this be, other than the fruit of ancient deeds?’ which suggests that the rich are morally superior to the poor whose poverty is their own fault. This seems to both undercut the moral imperative for social action and also vindicates the rich who are, in actual fact, often manifestly less moral than the poor. A further moral problem is that the belief in reincarnation results in the devaluation of life. This is exemplified in the *Bhagavad Gita* where Arjuna is reassured by Krishna that he need not worry about killing his relatives in battle since they will simply be born again in another body.

**Experience**

Although most of us have no recall of past lives some people claim to remember them either under hypnosis or spontaneously.

**(a) Hypnotic Regression**

Such cases involve a hypnotist putting his patient into a trance and then regressing them back through childhood and then apparently beyond to a previous life or lives. The results are dramatic with the patient not only describing in detail what seems to be happening but also reliving it with attendant emotions. Many experts are skeptical however, for the following reasons:

1. Except in very rare cases, patients under hypnosis think and speak in their native, everyday language not that of the recalled person who may well have been living in a different country where a different language was spoken, and yet language is so integral to who we are, to our very identity, that one would not expect this.

2. Anyone who has seen a hypnotist entertainer will know that patients under hypnosis are very prone to living out fantasies at the suggestions of the hypnotist who may, even unconsciously, be feeding them with cues. The fantasy theory may explain why so many patients claim to have been famous people and even why it is possible to lead them to hypnotic progression so that they can apparently describe future lives (for examples type in ‘hypnotic progression’ into YouTube).

3. Cryptomnesia also seems to have a part to play whereby the patient draws upon information that they have previously perhaps read or seen on TV and since forgotten until put into the trance state. This information can sometimes be false. For example, one patient apparently recalled being a Viking with his winged helmet which owes more to Asterix than genuine Viking attire!

**(b) Spontaneous memory**

In the last century, in books such as *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia; 1974) I. Stevenson investigated a number of children who claimed to remember previous lives and the results seemed impressive as details were followed up and were apparently corroborated. However, again some scholars have raised a number of concerns:

1. Examples all came from cultures with a strong prior belief in reincarnation which may have affected the results. For example, interviews were done through a local
translator who might have wished to persuade the Westerner to believe. Then again, the child would have gained kudos in her culture by claiming such memories. Perhaps also there was the hope of gaining Western money by playing along with the researcher.

2. If we are all supposed to have reincarnated, why cannot the rest of us from secular, Christian or Muslim cultures remember previous lives?

3. Amongst groups that do believe in reincarnation and boast many examples of recall there are some interesting anomalies. For example, frequency of memories of previous lives as the opposite sex differ dramatically. For the Tlingits and the Druzes it is 0% but for the Kutchin of N.W. Canada it is 50%, and 28% for the Burmese. Then whereas instances of recalled reincarnation into the same family is common in Burma and amongst the Eskimos, it is very rare in other cultures. Also gaps between incarnations differ markedly: four months average for the Haida of Alaska and British Columbia, yet forty eight months for the Tling people. In each case the testimonials mirror the expectations and beliefs of their particular societies which make their voracity suspect.

Nevertheless, having acknowledged all of the above points, there still remain some few extraordinary cases which are very difficult to explain away. However, other paranormal possibilities present themselves so that one is still not bound to accept the reincarnation hypothesis.

Some philosophers have speculated that a dead person may leave behind a ‘psychic husk’ (C. D. Broad) or ‘flickering thoughts and sense impressions’ (C.T.K. Chari) which could be picked up by a living person either unwittingly or by trained spiritualist mediums. This is analogous to the view that a ghostly apparition is not really a visitation of the dead person but rather an ‘impression’ on the atmosphere rather like moving images of a dead film-star on the cinema screen. In each of these cases the dead subject is elsewhere but they have left, at least temporary, traces behind.

Alternatively, some contend that occasionally an actual dead spirit may communicate with the living just as Samuel did through the witch of Endor (1 Sam. 28). Putative cases of reincarnation could then be explained in terms of spirit possession rather than rebirth. Thus the Christian can continue to maintain that the case for reincarnation is unproven and runs contrary to Scripture, Tradition and Reason.

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The Indwelling of the Spirit: A Hindu-Christian reflection

Author: Dr Christina Manohar, Associate Chaplain at the University of Gloucestershire and Visiting Lecturer in Hinduism, Redcliffe College.

Synopsis
The Upaniṣads point to the mysterious, intimate motion of the Spirit; the mystery that pervades the universe is present in the innermost self of human beings. In this context the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as the indweller will play a decisive role in mutual enrichment of Hinduism and Christianity. The Upaniṣads invites us to discover the fullness of the Spirit in the inner centre of inmost being of every human. While we acclaim that the Upaniṣadic accent of the inward experience of the divine resonates with many strands of Christian tradition we do not fail to point out that in the Christian tradition the Spirit is understood within a Trinitarian framework. The inner communion or the perichoretic relationship within the members of the Trinity reveals that within Godhead there is communion. Consequently this enables us to say that when we speak of the indwelling of the Spirit we are in fact speaking about the indwelling of the Trinity. This perception of a personal, interactive and inter-subjectivity of the Spirit enriches any understanding of the Spirit in impersonal and individualistic terms.

Introduction
Hindu theology and, to be precise, the Upaniṣadic tradition is much oriented towards ‘spirituality’ ‘interiority’ ‘self–realization’ and a deep yearning to move from the incomplete to the complete (pūrnam). The following Upaniṣadic prayer found in Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3:8 describes the spiritual longing of the Hindus.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Asato ma sad gamaya (from unreal lead me to real)} \\
\text{Tamaso ma jyotir gamaya (from darkness lead me to light)} \\
\text{Mṛtyor ma amṛtam gamaya (from death lead me to immortality)}
\end{align*}
\]

It is to the Spirit that most Upaniṣadic texts point. What comes through the texts of the Upaniṣads is the deep yearning to listen to the internal voice of Supreme Life-force. Hence in this context the understanding of the Holy Spirit as indweller and inspirer is a relevant theme to explore. Our aim here is not to offer a new theologoumena or to meditate on Christian faith as mere concepts but to start with the experience of the Spirit which is at the centre of Christian theological tradition as well as Upaniṣadic tradition of Hinduism.

The Upaniṣadic Tradition
The Upaniṣads represent a time when Brahmanic ritualism had reached saturation point and the age of the Spirit began. The Upaniṣadic tradition is a reaction to an overemphasis on ritualism in religion. Instead of an external religion of rituals and sacrifices, it emphasises the intuitive and experiential knowledge of Brahman. Thus, it introduced a new perspective in Indian religious thinking. Augustine Thottakara explains,

The new trend of thought marked a shift from the external sacrificial ritualism of the Brahmanas to a search for internal knowledge of one Supreme Reality of
the Upaniṣads, from *karma–kanda* to *jnana–kanda*, from Brahmanism to a kind of Śrāmanism, from a polytheistic idea of godhead to a monotheistic or monistic concept of the absolute ultimate Being. Man who was the sacrificer (*yajamana*) in the Brahmanic period, becomes the seeker of knowledge of Brahman (*brhama–jijnasu*) in the Upaniṣads (Thottakara 1998: 341).

The Upaniṣads cover several centuries (from the ninth to the sixth centuries BCE) of reflection on the divine, the mystery of being and the universe. There are about 112 Upaniṣads and some of the oldest ones are Brhadāranyaka, Chāndogya and Isa Upaniṣads. *Upa–ni–sād* literally means to be seated at the feet of the master in order to receive his instruction. They are mainly conversations between a master and a disciple. This teaching is secret and hidden and “is the disclosure of certain ‘correspondences’ which are not perceptible at the mental level (the realm of *manas*), but which a particularly acute *buddhi* (intelligence or intuition) can discern” (Abhishiktananda 1975, Reprint ed.1997: 83). The central message of the Upaniṣads is intuition of non–duality and the inner correspondence between ātman and Brahman. The Supreme Reality is understood to be “the deepest mystery of immanence in the human consciousness” (Abhishiktananda 1975, Reprint ed. 1997: 77). The deepest centre of the human being, which is ātman, and the deepest centre of the universe, which is Brahman, are one and the same. This shows the “impossibility of putting in *dvanda*, in a pair, God and the cosmos” because “the Absolute is not simply transcendent but transcendent and immanent all in one. The transcendent dimension forbids monistic identification; the immanent dimension, dualistic differentiation” (Panikkar 1968: 519-520). With this overview of the Upaniṣadic tradition we shall now consider the Upaniṣadic epistemology in some detail.

**The Upaniṣadic Epistemology**

The Upaniṣadic way of knowing is not imparting information or conceptual knowledge; instead, the aim here is to help the seeker to have an attitude of mind and heart to experience God within. It is realising the unique presence of the Self or the Supreme Spirit within one’s own self. This is realising the secret place within a person, which is called *guha* in the Upaniṣads. In the unfathomable silence, God is known. “Only in a state of total peace and relaxation, pure receptivity and expectancy, emptied of all thought, desire and volition, a simple transparency” will the Real be manifested in all its fullness. Brahman is “astī” (“it is”), “*tad etad iti*” (“that is it”) (Abhishiktananda 1979, Revised ed. 1997: 52).

According to the Upaniṣads, intellectual tools cannot help to understand God but God is known and heard in the heart. One has to be receptive to the unique presence of God within oneself. “It is not a question of attaining to the knowledge of God or to the Presence of God, but of recognizing, realizing, that this Presence is” (Abhishiktananda 1979, Revised ed. 1997: 35, n.7).

Knowing God within means seeing the relation between God and the world as *a-dvaitic*. The relationship between God and the world is neither one nor two.

It is simply the mystery that God and the world are not two. It is the mystery of unity (*ekatvam*). Advaita or non–duality means precisely this: neither God alone, nor the creature alone, not God plus the creature, not an ontological oneness; creature does not become God or God does not become creature but an indefinable non–duality which transcends at once all separation and all confusion (Abhishiktananda 1979, Revised ed. 1997: 98).
Advaita is not an idea but it is an experience. Abhishiktananda explains, “God is ‘Adsum’ – ‘I am present to thee’. The human being is also ‘adsum’ to God in the depth of his being. True wisdom is the experience of the divine ‘adsum’ at the base of my own ‘adsum’ to myself” (Abhishiktananda 1989, Revised ed. 2000: 6, n.1). In the Upaniṣads, the term Ātman illuminates the close proximity between divine and human.

Ātman

In the Upaniṣads, the term Ātman is used to designate the Self, the Ultimate Reality that is Brahman. The root word ‘an’ (aniti), from which the term Ātman comes, means ‘to breathe, ‘to enliven,’ ‘to vivify.’ Therefore, the meaning of Ātman is “breath, life, life–principle, spirit, the vivifier.” There is also another opinion that the word Ātman comes from the root word ‘at’ (atati) which means “to go, to walk, to wander.” This indicates movement, the wind or the moving Spirit. Hence, the Brahman, the Paramātman or the Supreme Spirit is understood as the moving Spirit (Thottakara 1998: 342).

It is worth noticing that the Hebrew word ‘ruach,’ the Greek pneuma and the Latin spiritus have similar meanings. They refer to ‘breath’, ‘wind’, ‘movement of air’, ‘God’s energy’, ‘God’s strength, power and dynamic activity.’ The Spirit is wind–like energy. It refers to the creative and dynamic activity of God (Heron 1983: 3-4). Phrases such as the Spirit of the Lord, the wind of the Lord, the breath of the Lord refer to God’s activity both at the physical and at the spiritual level. The ruach of the Lord inspired the prophets, charismatic leaders and artisans. The ruach of God was active in liberating the Israelites from the Egyptian bondage. The ruach is life–giving breath. It is the source of life (Gen 1:2; 6:17; 7:15; Gen 45:27; Judg 15:19; Ps 104:29; Ps 33:6; Job 33:4; 27:3; Isa 42:5; Ezek 37:5ff.). It is “God’s own power of creation, and the power of life, which is communicated, to all created things, in heaven and on earth.” The Spirit is the creative and vital energy of all that lives (Moltmann 1990: 92).

Ātman is also the term used to designate the human self, soul, spirit, and individual self. It indicates “that which makes an individual to be himself, that is, the principle of his essential personal identity” (Abhishiktananda 1975, Revised ed. 1997: 102). The term ātman is “the self – grammatically reflexive personal pronoun; it is the principle which constitutes the reality of the person, his awareness of himself” (Abhishiktananda 1979, Revised ed. 1997: 61). In other words, the ātman or human spirit signifies “the most intimate core of the conscious being at a level beyond the reach of sense or mind” (Abhishiktananda 1974, Revised ed. 1997: 95-96). It refers to the interiority of human self and it is the central point of all reality. Similarly, in Vedic understanding the word ātman means “breath or vital essence from which develops the meaning of soul or self” (Boyd 1977: 239). Also, the term prāṇa refers primarily to “the source of life within, and then to its diffused appearance throughout all the organs of body and mind, which are called pranah, or ‘vital breaths’, in the plural” (Abhishiktananda 1974, Revised ed. 1997: 95). Here again it is worth noticing that the Hebrew term ruach also denotes “the vital principle in man, his whole psychical life, though usually regarded on its higher side, as the religious origin of the usage would suggest” (Robinson 1958: 20-21). Ruach is what gives life and personality and it is “what makes a creature a recognizable human being…” (Marriage 1989: 31). The term pneuma like the Hebrew nephesh is synonymous with the human soul or self or person.

In Upaniṣadic thought ātman as real self is distinguished from the empirical self. The ātman as real self is “the source of the three major elements of spiritual experience, namely the sense of the real, the presence of awareness, and the extension of freedom. It is the unity of being, truth and freedom.” The empirical self is the sum of one’s “customary roles, habits, aspirations, values, ideas, ideals, attitudes and sentiments, which are the deposits of his culture, and those biogenic traits which are reinforced by the mutable and the accidental” (Winthrop 1963: 147).
The Upanisads give central place to ātman as the real self and speak about the correspondence between ātman as the interiority of human self and the divine Self, Brahman. In the Upanisadic understanding, Brahman the transcendent Self indwells the heart of human beings as ātman. Chāndogya Upaniṣad 3.14.2-4 says,

The intelligent whose body is spirit, whose form is light, whose thoughts are true, whose nature is like ether, omni–present and invisible, from whom all works, all desires, all sweet odours and tastes proceed; he who embraces all this, who never speaks, and is never surprised, he is my self within the heart, smaller than a corn of rice, smaller than a corn of barley, smaller than a mustard seed, smaller than a canary seed or the kernel of a canary seed. He also is my self within the heart, greater than the earth, greater than the sky, greater than the heaven, greater than all these worlds. He from whom all works, all desires, all sweet odours and taste proceed, who embraces all this, who never speaks and who is never surprised, he, my self (atman) within the heart, is that Brahman.

Knowing Brahman is like a lightning flash within. The desire to know God presupposes certain knowledge about God and therefore becomes a way of knowing (Chethimattam 1971: 133). Knowledge about God is not something intellectually constructed but rather it is received and experienced. It is knowing through one’s own inner self. This is antar–yāṭrā. Hindu pilgrimages to different sacred places are the symbolic act of this antar–yāṭrā. Therefore, knowing God does not rely on objective observation but on subjective experience. The antahkaraṇa, the instrument of inner experience, provides reliable evidence. This is a self–authenticating experience which needs no further proof. It is even said that an objective inner silence is reliable evidence of the knowledge of Brahman. By an objective inner silence is meant unbiased inner silence. It is a particular combination of concentration and detachment leading to an attentive inner silence. This subjective experience can be called intuition or sudden illumination or enlightenment. But this subjective experience does not discard reason; rather, it enhances reason. In the Upanisadic tradition ontology, epistemology and metaphysics are deeply interconnected. In the Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad Yajñavalkya instructs his wife, Maitreyī, saying that Brahman, the Self alone, should be seen, heard, thought and pondered upon (Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad 2.4.5). Brahman is the unseen Seer, unheard Hearer, the unthought Thinker, the ununderstood Understander (Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad 3.8.11).

The Indwelling of the Spirit and Knowing God Within: A Christian Reflection

The idea of the indwelling of the Spirit is not alien to biblical thought. In Ex 29:45–46, the liberator of Israel is one who dwells among the people. This theme recurs again in the prophets and in the priestly writings. In the Targums the term Shekinah is used to express the immanence of God who indwells his people. According to Wisdom literature, Wisdom is the imperishable breath in all things. Wisdom is kind, beneficient, all–powerful, permeates all things and holds all things in harmony (Wisd 7:22-8:1). Wisdom is the divine mind immanent in this world guiding and directing all things from within. In the New Testament, in various passages, this idea of God’s indwelling presence occurs (Jn 14:16-17, 23, 26; 15: 10, 26 Gal 4:6; I Cor 3:16; I Cor 6:19; 2 Cor 1:22; 3:2, 3; Rom 5:5; 2:29; 8:9, 11, 27; Eph 3:17; 2 Thess 3:5; I Jn 4: 12-13; I Jn 4:16).

The relationship between the human spirit and the divine Spirit is one of interpersonal communion. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen explains that by human spirit we mean “that aspect of a man or a woman through which God most immediately encounters him or her (Rom 8:16; Gal 6:18; Phil 4:23; Heb 4:12) that dimension wherein one is most immediately open to God
although one cannot be very sure in several passages of the New Testament whether the term spirit refers to the human spirit or the divine Spirit (Kärkkäinen, Pneumatology, p. 28).

C. F. D. Moule points out that in the New Testament, for example in I Cor 2: 9-16, the term *pneuma* is used in reference both to God and to human beings. This indicates the affinity between the divine and human. Moreover, it also suggests that revelation comes to human beings through the Spirit. Thus, the Spirit stands for both the transcendence of God and God’s immanent accessibility to human beings. Further, Moule points out Paul’s emphasis on the ‘innate capacity’ of humans to receive God (Moule 2000: 8-9, 16).

Abhishiktānanda comments on Paul’s use of the term *pneuma* for both human and divine:

Paul shows a disconcerting freedom in his use of the term pneuma. … Paul’s intuition boldly soars up to the Real, caring all too little for the fine distinctions of the intellect. At the deepest level of man’s spirit is found the Spirit of God by which man’s spirit is quickened (Rom 8:14). At the deepest level of man’s interiority there is the interiority of God, his Spirit, the spirit which introduces man into the very depths of God (I Cor 2:10). In fact, the Spirit alone can sound and reveal the abyss of Being, for it is in him that the cycle of Being, that is, of God’s complete self-manifestation in his own mystery comes to its term (Abhishiktananda 1974, Revised ed. 1997: 96).

In Yves Congar’s view, Paul uses the term ‘indwelling’ in the sense of “entering into a definitive relationship of covenant with God and of enjoying communion with him on the one hand and, on the other, of being in a state in which one is the true temple in which God dwells and where he is given spiritual worship” (Congar 1983: 80). Wheeler Robinson says, “If we may use the term ‘spirit’ to denote our human self-consciousness, the first thing we may say about it is that spirit operates as a unifying centre” (Robinson 1958: 68).

Further, Robinson points out that the term *ruach* originally meant desert wind, which carries an element of mystery and power. The term wind refers to upward thrust and to power that is beyond the human, which can be called supernatural. “It does exhibit the real inclusion of one life within another, … in which man loses himself to find himself, and his life is ‘hid with Christ in God’” (Robinson 1958: 273). Yet the Spirit is distinctly other to the human personality. The divine Spirit is a personality higher than our own and includes our own without destroying the “content of our self-consciousness” (Robinson 1958: 276).

Knowing God within is not uncommon also in the thought of the early church theologians. In the view of Didymus the Blind (c.313–98 CE) the Holy Spirit “will teach not like those who have acquired an art or knowledge by study and industry, but as being the very art, doctrine and knowledge itself” (McDonnell 1985: 223-224 citing On the Holy Spirit 1, 2 (PG 23,130)). Augustine spoke about holy restlessness. Our hearts remain restless until they rest in God. We perceive God in our inner self. Augustine’s exhortation, “Do not go abroad. Return within yourself. Truth dwells in the inner man. And if you find that your nature is mutable, transcend yourself…Therefore, head for the place where the very light of reason is kindled” (Lossky 1977: 74 citing De vera religione, I, 39; PL 34: 154), Meister Eckhart’s confession that ‘God is nearer to me than I am to myself’ and Thomas Aquinas’ reference to the intimate presence of God in humans come close to the Upaniṣadic understanding of God. Like Augustine and Eckhart many other Christian mystics experienced God within. Bernard of Clairvaux speaks of a spiritual ladder leading up to God in progression from love of neighbour to love of God. Bonaventure spoke about the mind’s journey to God. Teresa of Ávila reaches to the castle of the soul through seven steps. Thomas Merton speaks of the spirituality of soul. It is in the innermost chamber that the soul perceives God and God perceives Godself. (Moltmann 1999: 91-93; Congar 1983: 81). They characterise a kind of
infinite passion for God. They find fulfillment only in God. It is mutual knowing between God and the soul. This is often known as “the soul’s ‘mystical bridal’ with God” (Moltmann 1999: 93).

We can also say that Upanisadic epistemology shares common ground with the Orthodox tradition of the East. In the Eastern tradition, the understanding is that God is beyond all conceptualization. The knowledge of God is experiential in the most personal sense. The knowledge of God brings about communion with God. Basil of Caesarea speaks about the pneumatological roots of the knowledge of God. The work of the Holy Spirit is interior, it is knowledge from within, the Spirit produces illumination and one discovers God within (Bobrinskoy 1984: 56 referring to Basil On the Holy Spirit, XVIII.47; XXVI. 61). According to Gregory Palamas, the knowledge of God is union with God. The apophatic way of knowing leads to union with God (Russo 1998: 173). Congar comments that in the Eastern tradition, it is not possible “either to know God or to express any positive idea of him, the deepest knowledge of him being purely experiential or mystical” (Congar 1983: 62).

Tracing back into history, Congar points out that Spiritual movements from the eleventh century onwards reacted to the hierarchical power structures by emphasising the role of the Holy Spirit. These movements emphasised inner light and spiritual experience as the basis for the daily life of a Christian. All these movements arose, says Congar, because of the lack of importance paid to subjective spiritual experience in religious life. Thus, they were a reaction to rationalism. This tells us that God’s intervention in human life can happen by way of mediation and also by way of immediacy. What is important here is the “inner illumination” that has occurred to people on various occasions and thus, “an irreducible personal factor enters into the instituted framework.” However, as Congar very clearly states, “this does not mean that it is not Christological. It could be called an element of Christological pneumatology or pneumatological Christology” (Congar 1986: 48-53).

Many contemporary theologians speak along the same lines. For example according to James Dunn the Spirit is “essentially an experiential concept” (Dunn 1975: 201). In G. S. Hendry’s view, “… the Spirit is God knowing himself, and to receive the Spirit is to participate in that knowledge” (Hendry 1953: 34). Kilian McDonnell says that the Spirit is both experience and a way of knowing (McDonnell 1985: 222-23). “The Spirit known (object) is discovered by the Spirit knowing (subject)” (McDonnell 1985: 216-17). In other words, “God is object, but only because He is seen with His own seeing” (McDonnell 1985: 222).

Pneumatology plays the epistemological role in theology since no one understands God except through the Spirit. Knowing God by the Spirit within is non–objective, rather than a subjective experience. The Holy Spirit within, as a hidden persuader or the divine immanence in the human, respects and enhances human personality. Hans Urs von Balthasar speaks of the Spirit as non-objective. The Spirit is breath and he breathes through us (Hans Urs von Balthasar 1993: 111-12). According to Heribert Mühlen, the Spirit is “the mediated mediation who mediates all to all, but who himself needs no further mediation” (McDonnell 1998: 222 citing Heribert Mühlen, “Das Christusereignis als Tat des Heiligen Geistes,” Mysterium Salutis (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1969) 3/2.514). Thomas Weinandy says “… because of the Spirit dwelling within us, we are assumed into the very depths of God’s inner being – the mystery of God himself” (Weinandy 1995: 34). It is a blending of spirit with spirit or mingling of spirits with no replacement of human natural powers with divine powers or, to use Moule’s expression, the Spirit impinges on spirit (Moule 2000: 17). Robinson says that it is the “kinship of spirit and Spirit” (Robinson 1958: 121).

Abhishiktānanda points out that in the Indian context “God’s ‘Spirit’ would best be understood as meaning his ātman, his Self, since he is the deepest centre, the very ‘inwardness’, of the divine mystery.” Hence, one’s encounter with the Spirit is an encounter with God’s interiority at the deepest level of one’s self. It is the meeting of the Spirit with the spirit. “In this depth
of the soul, where the depth of God and the depth of the soul are but one and the same depth” (Abhishiktananda 1974, Revised ed. 1997: 95).

In Upanisadic terms, as Abhishiktananda interprets, this is the communion between ātman and Brahman where ātman the human self is not absorbed in the divine Self. It is a deep interior communion between human and divine. It is a state of oneness or unity that is beyond dualistic categories. It is non–dual or a–dvaita, a kind of non–duality that transcends all separation. It is not a kind of monism but a unity–in–distinction. Following the Upanisadic pattern of thinking, Abhishiktananda explains that, in the most secret centre of one’s being, “the only means of illumination is the purest awareness of the self; and this self-awareness is in fact nothing else than the reflection, the mirror, of the unique ‘I AM’, the very Name of Yahweh” (Abhishiktananda 1974, Revised ed. 1997: 94-5). Here, God and human beings do not become one, yet they are not two. It is not ontological oneness yet it is in the divine ‘I’ that the human ‘I’ finds its ontological status and existence. Knowing is this ‘deep awareness.’ This is an awareness of the ineffable mystery that is deep within yet transcends one’s being. It is beyond all concepts.

John Moffitt, analysing the Upanisadic way of knowing, claims, “in Christian terms, the voice of intuitive wisdom bears witness to God’s dwelling in the depths of the human soul, where he is to be known. It tells a man to know God as the foundation of his own existence” (Moffitt 1973: 31). Avery Dulles speaks about five models of revelation namely, revelation as doctrine, revelation as history, revelation as inner experience, revelation as dialectical presence and revelation as new awareness (Dulles 1992: 121). We can see some parallels between the Upanisadic way of knowing and Dulles’ model of revelation as inner experience, which is a direct divine communication to the human soul that is open to God. The above discussion makes it clear that the Spirit is an epistemological principle and an ontological reality. The Spirit is the indweller and also the link between God and human beings.

While we highlight these parallels between the Upanisadic epistemology and the epistemological role of the Spirit as understood in the Christian tradition we do not fail to acknowledge what Christian tradition has to offers to enrich the Upanisadic understanding of Spirit.

The Spirit in a Trinitarian Relationship: A Distinctive Contribution of Christianity

In the Christian tradition the Spirit is always understood in relation to the Father and the Son. Jürgen Moltmann emphasises the Spirit’s Trinitarian personhood in his writings:

The nature of the Holy Spirit is perceived only in his relationships to the other persons of the Trinity, who are 'of like nature,' His trinitarian inter–subjectivity illuminates his subjectivity, because his subjectivity is constituted by his inter–subjectivity. In his Trinitarian inter–personhood he is person, in that as person he stands over against the other persons, and as person acts on them (Moltmann 1999: 289-90).

The same idea is explained by Abhishiktänanda as the advaita of the Spirit. The Spirit and the Son are in each other rather than opposed to or stand over against each other. Likewise, when he speaks about the Trinity he says, “…In the mystery of God, at the very heart of Being, the Son and the Spirit proceed from the Father, alike in the non–duality (advaita) of nature and in the threefold communion (koinonia) of Persons.”

In the Spirit, he writes, the Father and the Son are fully revealed. The Spirit is the revelation of both the Father and the Son but the Spirit himself is not known apart from the Father and the Son (Abhishiktananda 1974, Revised ed. 1997: 103-4).
The biblical understanding of the indwelling of the Spirit as interpersonal communion can positively interact in general with the Upaniṣadic thinking of Brahman, who is the light that shines within the human self. The Upaniṣadic understanding could gain much from interacting with the concept of the Spirit of God as solidarity and communion. Michael Welker points out that the characteristic of the Spirit of God is a self–giving nature and self-withdrawal, even selflessness. The Spirit is a turning to others. The Spirit “makes present the self–withdrawing and self–giving Crucified One” and it is by “turning to Christ and others, the Spirit creates solidarity and communion” (Kärkkäinen 2002: 138 citing Michael Welker’s God the Spirit trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), pp. 280-83). In Abhishiktananda’s view, the Spirit is the perfect communion that adds koinonia to essential ekatvam or oneness. One’s own ‘I’ is discovered in the ‘I’ of the others.

The Indwelling of the Trinity

Hence if we affirm the Trinitarian basis for the Spirit then we have to affirm here that the fact that the Holy Spirit indwells us means that the whole Trinity indwells us. In Congar’s view, God encounters himself in the interiority of the human self.

   God himself is present as a gift and he dwells in our innermost depths—‘intimior intimo meo’, ‘more inward and more secret than my deepest and innermost self.’ This means that the heart of the believer is, to the extent that the Spirit dwells in it, a place where God encounters himself and where there is consequently an inexpressible relationship between the divine Persons. It is really the desire or longing of God himself interceding for the saints at a deeper level than their own expressed or expressible prayer. Jesus himself, after all, said: ‘O righteous Father…that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them’ (Jn 17:26) (Congar 1983: 117).

Similarly Thomas Smail points out the comments of Heribert Mühlen on John 14:23. The whole Trinity makes its home within a person:

   Those who love me will keep my word and my Father will love them and we will come to them and make our home with them.’ Here again is the same first person plural that we found in Genesis 1, but here it has an almost explicitly trinitarian understanding of God to give it substance. It is the God who is the ‘We’ of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in their unity and their distinctness in whose image we are made and in whose image we are to be remade (Smail 2003: 25 citing Heribert Mühlen, Der Heilige Geist als Person, Münster: Verlag Aschendorf, 1963).

Again, the Eastern doctrine of perichoresis is suggestive here. It sees the persons of the Trinity indwelling one another. They are consubstantial and they are “inside one another.” So, when we say the Holy Spirit indwells, we in fact mean the whole Trinity indwells a person (Congar 1983: 85). God indwelling us means a mutual communion between God and ourselves. Moltmann says, “In the charismatic experience of the Spirit, we experience the reciprocal perichoresis of God and ourselves. … In the Holy Spirit, the eternal God participates in our transitory life, and we participate in the eternal life of God. This reciprocal community is an immense, outflowing source of energy” (Moltmann 1999: 196). In Abhishiktananda’s view, in the innermost depth of man, “God contemplates himself eternally” (Abhishiktananda 1974, Revised ed. 1997: 121). Small comments that Jesus in his humanity is imago Trinitatis since the human life of Jesus reveals such an interpersonal communion. This is the clue to our own ontology (Smail 2003: 25). This is explained by Abhishiktananda
within the *advaitic* framework. Jesus was one with the Father or he found his ‘I’ in the ‘I’ of the Father. This is the place of ultimate encounter, the meeting of divine Spirit with the human spirit in the inner depth of one’s being.

For Jesus, God is truly ‘an Other’, another *I* distinct from his own *I*. Jesus addresses God as ‘You’, and God also speaks to him in the second person. With this *You*, this *Other*, Jesus has continual communion and communication. But the relationship is a particularly profound and mysterious one. No words can adequately describe it or fully express its richness (Abhishiktananda 1974, Revised ed. 1997: 79).

There is no place for division, confusion and separation between the two. There is no *dvaita* but *advaita*. This is seen in Jesus’ prayer too. His prayer is “enfolded in the unique *Thou*…” (Abhishiktananda 1974, Revised ed. 1997: 126-27). God is “not–one an–eka and also not–two, a–dvaita.” (Abhishiktananda 1974, Revised ed. 1997: 135).

This is the meeting of ātman and Brahman. It is not an equivalence of ātman and Brahman but the human self is truly the human self and the divine self is truly the divine self, a non–duality transcends oneness.

Jesus in Spirit was one with the Father. Jesus was inseparable from the Father and the Spirit. Jesus’ own pneumatic life offers a clue to our own pneumatic existence. In Apostle Paul’s view, mature Christians “live by the Spirit” (Gal 5:16), “led by the Spirit” (Gal 5:18), have “the mind of the Spirit” (Rom 8:6) and ordain their lives by “the law of the Spirit” (Rom 8:2). Yet he does not separate the Spirit from Christ. Living by the Spirit means living by Christ. Hence Paul could say ‘It is not I but Christ lives in me.’ Thus he offers a Christological and pneumatological perspective on Christian life.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion we say that developing an interior life and pointing to God who abides in the heart and the inmost realm of the human which is the true home of the divine is the strongest contribution of the Upaniṣadic tradition. Thus the Upaniṣads lay foundations for the theology of inward experience which is not uncommon to Christian tradition. Both Christianity and Hinduism point to this interiority. However, at least three points stand out in the foregoing discussion of the Christian reflection on the Spirit. In Christian tradition, pneumatology cannot be separated from Christology. The Spirit’s personhood is a Trinitarian personhood and the indwelling of the Spirit in Jesus makes Jesus *imago Trinitatis* and this precisely is the clue to our ontology. These are the distinctive contributions of Christian tradition to the Upaniṣadic tradition. The Upaniṣadic understanding of the Spirit can be greatly enriched by the rich understanding of the Spirit as relationship, solidarity and communion. The essential *ekatvam* of *advaita* can be enriched by communion of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.

In the end, not just Christ, not merely Spirit, not even Spirit and Christ but the Trinity is the point of convergence. God will be all in all (I Cor 15:28). It is in the Trinity that unity and communion take place since the Trinity itself is a model of such communion. To this end, The Spirit and the Bride say ‘come’ (Rev 22:17).
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Sheik-ing the Towers of Faith
Some missiological reflections on a trip to Dubai

Author: Andy Kingston-Smith, Lecturer in Mission, Redcliffe College. Andy is also involved in supporting ‘multi-directional mission’, serving in a pastoral capacity for Latin Partners, a sister organisation of Latin Link, and in the ‘Back to Europe’ initiative.

This article is a personal reflection on my very brief trip to Dubai a few months ago, and is intended merely to share a few cultural and missiological impressions, which in turn might stimulate interest in how, as Christians, we might engage with multi-faceted ‘models’, such as that presented by contemporary Dubai. My own interests in missiological engagements with postcolonialism, globalisation and ‘green’ issues serve as the backdrop to this brief commentary.

Multi-cultural expressions

In anticipation of this trip to visit close friends of mine, I did my homework, so to some extent there were no great surprises. However, there is always room to be amazed, and this was most clearly demonstrated by my close encounter with that enduring symbol of human ‘achievement’ – the skyscraper. In this case it was the jaw-dropping, awesomely-elegant Burj Khalifa [1]. Being afraid of heights I was, on balance, pleased the tower was still unopened to the public, for it mercifully resolved my inner tension to experience the views from nearly one kilometre up in the air, with the sheer terror this would undoubtedly cause me. However, ‘the Tower’ draws parallels with and generates paradoxes worth exploring when considering the meaning of Dubai, [2] situated as a place of interconnection between Christians [3] and Moslems, not to mention the vast numbers of Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and the myriad other faiths and worldviews that make up Dubai’s cosmopolitan population [4]. Never before have I walked through streets and shopping malls and encountered such a mix of ethnicity and social make-up. However, the apparent multicultural freedom this Emirate portrays masks, as one may suspect, deep-rooted traditional attitudes and behaviours, ever-evolving through the ebb-and-flow of cultural change.

On arrival I immediately came to understand what motivates Dubai, whilst passing through passport control. The Emirati official could barely disguise his disgust that I was not coming to ‘invest’ economically by staying at one of the many thousand(s)-pound-a-night hotels. To what extent is Dubai dependent on Western capital and investment, or is it propped-up by its neighbouring oil-rich cousin, Abu Dhabi, I mused, as we sped past the soaring skyscrapers lining the Sheik Zayed highway, on our way to ‘Arabian Ranches’, deep in desert-fronting suburbia. The lights of the night-blackened buildings twinkled in unison with the stars (if one could see past the light pollution) and I further wondered how this might serve as a ripe environmental case-study critique. Where does the energy come from to keep a place like Dubai running in turbo mode? [5] Of course, the economic toll of the recent global recession was to be seen in the dozens of luxury residential estates sitting dormant in the shimmering sands like pre-inhabited ghost-towns silently screaming for human presence to fill their chandeliered rooms; a stark reminder of the expression “over-extending oneself” came to mind!

A clash of mind-sets

Global Capitalism may account for the nature of Dubai’s image, which it projects so unashamedly to the rest of the world, but this is not a ‘plastic-city’ of the type one might associate in decadent parts of a secular West. If Dubai does have a soul, what does it look like? Is it an Islamicised version of Western Capitalism ‘converted’ by the trappings of secular humanism, or has it remained true to its Bedouin roots, despite the resulting enormous
changes in lifestyle experienced by the average Emirati over the last 40 years? Or does it represent some form of hybridity, so beloved of post-colonial critics, encompassing a hotchpotch of mixed identities and cultures? If by hybridity we mean the fusion of different ‘species’, (crudely stereotyping Western and Eastern traditions in this way), then it surely represents a fascinating study of how multicultural tolerance and behaviour can subsist together. This is not to say that Dubai is an exemplary example of libertarian freedoms; the Emirate has yet to bestow citizenship on any non-Emirati resident, nor does it allow unrestricted freedoms of religious expression. However, it does appear to blow a few myths about the supposed inability for Christians and Muslims to live together, so unhelpfully depicted in countless media representations in the West. Dubai gives the impression of exuding the life of an alternative Middle-Eastern version of the Big Apple, rather than providing an intersection for a ‘clash of civilisations’. However, the partial tolerance exercised is noteworthy, even if the motives (and the lengths travelled to protect this image, for financial and economic reasons) are questionable. Also, it should not be forgotten that the treatment of Dubai’s immigrant workers has been under scrutiny in the West for some time, although more recently steps have been taken in the right direction by Dubai’s ever-pleasing authorities in response to wide-spread criticism.

Human rights is a prickly subject for some Christians, who often prefer debates along the lines of ‘responsibilities’, but the safe-guarding of basic freedoms of expression, worship, shelter, education, and sustenance leaves Dubai facing significant indictments. In attempting to understand ‘the meaning’ of Dubai through peeling back the layers of a glitzy surface, the emphasis that Jim Krane gives to the Sheiks’ buying of loyalty from the people, is quite absorbing. Political freedom this certainly does not engender, even if pragmatists might laud such peace-creating policies. Of course, Dubai has been ‘blessed’ with phenomenal financial riches to shower on its people and such a successful approach is almost unthinkable anywhere else, in the current climate. This has compromised, understandably, the development of freedoms, such as speech and protest, and thus leaves the vast majority of ordinary Emirati people politically disenfranchised. Tightly-controlled citizenship and civil rights, even if the inconvenience of such restrictions is somewhat off-set by enormous material gains, are the reward for demonstrating subservient loyalty.

Back to Egypt? – the search for security and identity

One dimension that particularly fascinated me was to contemplate the extent to which the liminal space occupied by the many immigrant workers, acts as a catalyst in the search for spiritual answers to their predicaments. Was slavery in Egypt (which provided a degree of sentient, if oppressive, security) better than the aimless wanderings in the Sinai desert, where the promise of new beginnings tantalisingly remained just a mirage for a generation of Israelites? What is true freedom and how is it measured? To what degree is this identity-forming challenge, a tangible conundrum facing those thousands of migrants lured by false promises and subjected to the harsh temperatures of the burning Gulf sun, whilst labouring to build a tower befitting of Mammon’s increasingly ambitious aspirations? To encounter stories of spiritual quests and treasures uncovered, as documented in the Bible Society’s summer 2009 publication, unburdening migrant hearts, gave one hope to believe that God’s plan remains at work during ‘Egyptian captivity’, as we know from the biblical accounts of the distant past.

The incongruity of the ‘white sands’ of ski-Dubai seemed to capture the alluring impression of this oasis in the desert. Dubai’s attempt to push back the laws of nature reveals the Herculean drive of the Emirati royals to stamp their culture on the world map – ‘if the Americans can do it, so can we… but better, more luxuriously and more dazzlingly’, seems to be the motto; if not said, then most certainly implied. Style and luxury know no limits in this corner of the globe, where wonders that no human eye has ever captured before, lurk around every corner. The mix of Arab world music, Italian classical tenors and Western rock
smooched over the sound system as the world’s greatest fountain display burst into a cacophony of lights and sprays, whilst ‘the Tower’ gave its silent and solemn assent from way above; much as Sheikh Mohammed might do from the balcony of his palace as he surveys the wonders of his Kingdom. Yet this is no aloof King tinkering from afar; he is a man very much in touch with his people. He is seen regularly strolling about in public, and personally intervening in all manner of building and development projects. He may not be their elected leader, but he does appear to be in touch with the mood of his people, or is it that none of his subjects dare challenge his authority? Leadership, Bedouin-style, is certainly not democratic as we in the West might conceive it, but, arguably, it works for them.

**Genesis 11 revisited; reaching for the skies**

One question I could not succeed in deflecting, was to consider the degree to which ‘unlimited growth’ blinded the increasingly unsustainable model on which the city is based? Is Dubai just a city built on sand, or is it actually built on ‘rock’? Where does the Sheikh place his faith – in the ruthlessly efficient culture of Emirati leadership, in the labours of migrants and other passers-by, in the seemingly never-ending whirls of global capital flows, or in God, even? How does he reconcile his allegiance to Allah with the apparent allegiance of his Kingdom to Mammon? Is this a paradox encapsulating in microcosmic form the tensions inherent in the Enlightenment project, which, until only recently, seemed to happily co-exist? Despite Jesus’ unequivocal warning in Matthew 6:24, recent history suggests that the Christian West (if not in its current incarnation, certainly evidenced by its historical heritage) has played down this warning. Sustainability (which inherently encompasses concepts of limitation and stewardship) might be a buzz-word of contemporary environmental policies, but how does that interplay with the Western concept of ‘progress’, which the Sheiks appear to have swallowed ‘lock, stock and barrel’, and with such flamboyant emphasis? God is most definitely back, according to John Micklethwait, [10] although we may wish to adopt a rather more cautious tone to the global spread and influence of American-style faith. It might be that the folly of Genesis 11 is being replicated in its starkest form, building on the numerous ‘towers of Babel’ that have been popping up with increasing regularity, as nation pits against nation in the race to build the tallest structure that might fittingly extend into the skies. “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth”, has probably been uttered a number of times since the era of Genesis 11. It is the nations of the world that have come together in Dubai to erect the latest and grandest tower of Babel; how ironic!

**Colonial legacies**

A further accusation that has been levied at Dubai centres on the apparent terrorism that routes its way through its more liberal pathways; [11] be it money laundering, gem-stone trafficking or weapons distribution. It would be crass to make judgements on this when we can hardly plead innocence to the trafficking of harmful products and the exportation of imperialism throughout a murky aspect of European history, namely the colonial era, and which has left such a scar on many nations of the Global South. Is the West in a position to take the moral high ground on the complex and thorny issue of organised violence? It was Frantz Fanon who argued, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, that the colonised had the right to exact physical violence on the coloniser, since it was the coloniser who had initially exerted oppressive force on the colonised through organised and legitimated Government – sponsored actions. Decolonising the mind was the task of postcolonial engagement; far more difficult and time-consuming than driving out Imperial armies. Modern-day conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq remain at the centre of such ideological dialectics.

Two wrongs do not make a right, of course, and this is where Walter Wink’s articulation of Jesus’ third-way approach in *Engaging the Powers* (brilliantly enunciating creative and
peaceful responses to injustice) provides a constructive methodology. However, the complaint often heard from the mouths of Global Southerners is the apparent hypocrisy of Western dealings and its patronising (not to mention colonial, or to be more correct, neocolonial) attitudes furnished through the halls of the mighty institutions of Western power. The legacy of the Bretton Woods summit, namely the IMF [12], the World Bank and the WTO [13] remains dubious in the eyes of many non-Westerners. The rationale for the existence of these institutions was not necessarily wrong, although closer scrutiny in our increasingly critiquing culture is unveiling many a can-of-worms. Just as an increasing scrutiny of RBS demanded by a culture requiring greater accountability in traditionally-secretive sectors, many forms of protest and resistance are natural (and often, healthy) forms of providing appropriate checks and balances to the seemingly, ceaseless march of Western neo-colonialism. Condemnation of acts of terrorism is the right judgement to call, but how often do we indulge in sobering self-reflection and deliberate on the complex reasons that lie behind such acts of brutality, often carried out in retaliation? Retaliation for what, exactly, we might ask?

Conviction v. Fantasy

What does this have to do with the Gospel? Well, actually quite a lot. Christianity is a Gospel of grace (not the cheap variety) that seeks to demonstrate, through word and deed, agape love. We are in the ‘business’ of building for the Kingdom as Tom Wright is so careful to articulate. [14] This means doing away with the sense of superiority we have so carefully assembled over the last couple of centuries, and which is perpetuating a form of social and economic Darwinism. Instead, we must start (if we haven’t already begun the process) to listen to the voices on the margins, giving heed to those who have been excluded from the inner circles of the privileged. Are we really in a position to cast judgment on Dubai’s moment in the spotlight? Is it that we are jealous of the phenomenal growth (derived by an uncanny ability to spot opportunity and driven by risk-assumption, not risk-aversion) and success that Dubai has basked in, even if that gloss has become tarnished of late, thanks to the economic downturn? If we are honest, much of our criticism towards Dubai is perhaps indicative of the realisation of the heights from which we have fallen, as a Western civilisation.

However, I do wish to reiterate that the ‘fantasy factor’ which seems to sum up Dubai’s aspirations resonates true. If one is blown away by the scale, magnitude and achievement of Dubai as it stands today, the measure of its aspirations and proposals for the future are on another scale altogether. This is most notably demonstrated in the burgeoning concept of Dubailand [15] and the plans (now scrapped) to build a tower twice the height of the Burj Khalifa. [16] If that happened one might be forgiven for thinking that God will need to visibly re-intervene. Once again, reminiscent of times gone by as “nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.” [17]

A robust faith

Dubai is situated at a captivating juxtaposition of ‘East meets West’. How that will be managed is yet to be seen. However, the relative peace [18] and tolerance of a cosmopolitan and semi-hybrid culture is evident, and whether some notions of Dubai will come to symbolise any existing constructive dialogue between the two largest and fastest growing World faiths, is yet to be fully realised. Its plans to construct “the World” project [19] might be seen by critics as Dubai’s desire to become a focal point of all that is truly global (and ‘one’) – either positioning itself as the global hub, or perhaps, more likely, as a reflection of a limited attempt at cosmopolitan ‘world’ governance. Either way, such plans may yet be scuppered if allowance has not been adequately factored in for rising sea levels; a present and future moral to the parable of the wise and foolish builders. [20]
On what basis is faith ‘constructed’? How high does it aspire to reach? Where is it placed? If misplaced, does it lead to global domination and pride? Can it be divisive or might it lead to oneness in God’s globe?

Such questions face Dubai in these uncertain times – what answers will it give?

Notes

[1] “Burj” meaning “tower”. The tower was originally known as the Burj Dubai (see http://www.burjkhalifa.ae)
[2] “Burj Khalifa is the Arab world’s tribute to the art and science of modern engineering and design. Burj Khalifa symbolizes the aesthetic union of many cultures – from Arabia and the rest of the world.” – is how Mohammed Alabbar, Chairman of the tower’s chief construction company, Emaar, describes the vision of the tower (http://www.burjkhalifa.ae/the-tower/vision.aspx)
[3] There are more Europeans and Americans domiciled in Dubai than local Emiratis
[4] The majority of the population is made up of Indian and Asian migrants, who have provided the bulk of the human capital behind the construction of the city
[5] The energy required to keep the Burj Khalifa functioning apparently equates to that of a small city
[6] Christians may worship in a ‘public’ building, but places of non-Islamic worship are carefully prescribed by the authorities and indentured on land far from the hub of the city-centre
[8] “At the peak of construction, over 12,000 workers and contractors were on site every day, representing more than 100 nationalities” - (http://www.burjkhalifa.ae/language/en-us/the-tower/construction.aspx)
[11] Krane, in Dubai, articulates the unease, both within the United Arab Emirates, as well as beyond, to the capitalling of this lucrative industry by Emirati officials. The recent case of the Hamas leader hunted down and shot in Dubai adds weight to these fears
[12] There are many documented cases whereby the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has been accused of levying restrictive and damaging practices on developing nations through the implementation of structural adjustment programs
[13] Again, power has resided firmly in the hands of Western nations through the World Trade Organisation, especially when it comes to conceiving and implementing the terms of international trade
[15] For Dubailand, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2mIfegMI2o and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhvladJbGDE for tasters! Whether such astronomically-ambitious ideas will ever materialise is highly doubtful
[16] The Nakheel tower; see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DL55rejfmSw for an idea of the proposed scale of this now-abandoned project
[18] Krane, in Dubai, notes the unease and growing discomfort of the Emirates’ vulnerability to their demographic reality. With similar parallels to the paranoia of Pharaoh towards the gathering strength (yet remaining a minority amongst the Egyptian populace) of the Hebrews, the Emirati population of Dubai is outnumbered by 7 to 1, with significant implications for national security
[19] See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7eUcRjo9Yv4

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Total Abandon

by Gary Witherall with Elizabeth Cody Newenhuyse.

Review by Tim Davy, Director of the Centre for the Study of Bible and Mission, Redcliffe College, and co-editor of Encounters.

In 2002 Bonnie Witherall, an American missionary working in Sidon, Lebanon, was killed by a gunman. *Total Abandon* is an autobiographical account of this tragic event told by her husband, Gary.

The book acts as a testimony of Gary’s life up to that point, including his upbringing in England, his conversion, his training for ministry in America (where he met Bonnie), and their subsequent move to Lebanon. In moving detail it deals also with the aftermath of Bonnie’s death and how Gary slowly came to terms with it.

While *Total Abandon* does deal with some extraordinary circumstances, there is also much to consider in relation to the ‘ordinariness’ of missionary life. One example is the way Gary talks about their need for patience as they worked in the US, waiting for some clear guidance about their future ministry. He also shares in a very honest way about some of the practical frustrations of cross-cultural living:

> it's easy to romanticize the missionary life… And it isn't always heroic. You go to a country where no one cares about you, no one is interested in you. You feel almost silly walking around the streets trying out the new words in the new language you've learned: “I like my blue cup.” There is a certain amount of frustration because it takes time before you can interact deeply in conversation with the people you are trying to reach because of the language barrier.

How refreshing to read about the nitty-gritty! But of course it is the horror of his wife’s death that provides the focus of Gary’s story. And yet, in the midst of his pain and grief, Gary comes across as an imperfect and broken man who clings onto the grace of God, able even to forgive Bonnie’s killer (though he never finds out who it was).

The readers is struck, too, by the role the people of God play in Gary’s story. Throughout the book he refers to a wide range of people from whom he received advice, wisdom, comfort and fellowship in the midst of darkness.

*Total Abandon* is readable, upsetting and challenging, both in relation to the potential costs of discipleship but also in how we as a Christian community walk with those who are experiencing loss and grief. It is a very worthwhile read.

Buy *Total Abandon* from St Andrew’s Bookshop.

Author: Gary Witherall with Elizabeth Cody Newenhuyse

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Please Note: The views expressed in this review are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of Redcliffe College. If you would like to respond to this review, please use the ‘Voice your comments’ form on the Encounters website (<www.redcliffe.org/encounters>). You may prefer to email your response to mission@redcliffe.org, in which case please remember to include your full name, your organisation/role and whether you would like your comments posted on the Encounters discussion board.