I. Ecumenics as Intercultural Theology

I.1 Theology has always been done interculturally; how could it be otherwise? In its origins, Christianity was thoroughly Jewish and indigenous to Palestine, though very soon, impelled by the missionary vision of St Paul, it moved out into the Mediterranean world with Greek as its medium, and eventually it appropriated – indeed, became assimilated to – the terminology and concepts of Greek philosophy. Wherever it has taken root, Christian faith has been embodied in the languages and customs of a wide variety of cultures, while always remaining itself and exercising a critical function vis-à-vis what was alien to itself. No religion of transcendence, what Aloysius Pieris calls ‘metacosmic’ religion, can exist in a pure form, detached from the myriad ways in which human beings think, feel, speak and act; despite its claims to uniqueness and universality, such religion remains always and without exception in a kind of symbiosis with the ‘cosmic’ religion whose points of reference are the natural world and communities living in harmony with nature. Transcendent religion exists in a constant tension between the languages and cultural idioms of its own origins, which always bear the marks of particular times and places, and the new cultural forms in which it is continually called to re-express itself.

Theology, then, can only be done interculturally; it is a process of continual translation between humanly constructed cultural worlds. It is only relatively recently, however, that the full implications of this fact have been realised. While the cultural and linguistic osmosis that has given shape to Christian faith in ever new ways in a variety of contexts – including those of Western Europe! – can be documented again and again from mission history, another constant theme is that of ‘meliorism’, as it has been well called: the assertion that Christian revelation is indubitably true, which entails its superiority over every conceivable form of religion. It is surely not accidental that this conviction of superiority went hand in hand with the civilisational achievements which made missionary expansion possible. A logical deduction from this was the imperative of conversion: only by accepting Christ and rejecting their
own beliefs and practices could people who were ‘other’ than Western or Eastern European Christians be saved.

Now we have reached a situation of ‘inter-culturation’: the process of encounter and mutual transformation has become at least two-way and is often many-sided. We Christians – to take us as the paradigmatic example – can now see our faith cast in their linguistic, liturgical and legal forms, our theology transposed into their symbols and concepts – and some of us can welcome the resulting enrichment of our faith. Not only that: in principle, and increasingly in practice, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and also adherents of ‘primal’ or indigenous traditions such as those of Aboriginal Australia or the Pacific Islands are learning to recognise and accept the re-appropriation of their religious and cultural heritages by Christians and others. Some Buddhist scholars are beginning to talk about Buddhist theology in the sense of a ‘Buddhology’ modelled on its Christian counterparts as critical reflection on the pluriformity of Buddhist traditions as they encounter one another ‘ecumenically’ in contexts of modernity, post-modernity and globalisation.

In the case of Christianity, these transformations by no means meet with universal approval, nor do they follow the predictions of ecumenists and missiologists. Those in authority – not just in the Vatican! – have an intense suspicion of syncretism, the uncontrolled mingling of disparate cultural and religious elements, resulting in a collage of spiritual teachings and practices tailored to individual tastes. The result, it is feared, will be relativism, the denial of absolute validity to any particular set of religious convictions. But, as Paul Knitter never tires of reminding us, ‘truly’ need not mean ‘only’. The point is rather that historic religious identities and irreplaceable semantic heritages are at risk unless ways are found to preserve those aspects of truth which they embody and express without destroying them in the process. They are, after all, non-renewable resources.

Westerners do not always appreciate the extent to which a new, global ‘Christendom’ is taking shape as a plethora of Evangelical, Pentecostal and Adventist churches and para-church mission organisations aggressively and ‘successfully’ evangelise people and peoples, from the mega-cities to the remotest corners of the so-called ‘developing’ world, while all over Africa, Latin America and the Pacific, as well as
among immigrant groups from these regions in the West, ‘health, wealth and happiness’ churches of various kinds spring into existence. Wildly diverse as these rapidly growing Christian denominations are, they share a tendency simply to bypass inherited ecclesial structures and doctrines, and they apply what they take to be Christian principles directly to people’s lives and immediate needs. They promise to get results by solving the most urgent problems of the poor, the uneducated, and the disorientated victims of runaway urbanisation. But even at the margins of these global processes there are cases in which peoples of their own volition have substituted a form of Christianity for their indigenous cultures. In one documented case, the tiny Urapmin people in the far West of Papua New Guinea adopted – and adapted – the strict Baptist faith brought by missionaries to neighbouring villages in place of their own culture. Not dissimilar processes are underway in Islam as a kind of ‘global ummah’ takes shape through migration and the new electronic media. The compartmentalisation of academic disciplines into separate fields such as anthropology, sociology, religious studies and theology has militated against adequate study of such phenomena.

Almost twenty-five years ago a group of colleagues at the University of Frankfurt, with very few means and uncertain prospects of success, launched a programme of visiting professorships and scholarly symposia called Theologie interkulturell. The construction is deliberately adverbial, not adjectival: they did not presume to envisage ‘intercultural theology’ as some kind of finished product; rather, they set out to ‘do theology interculturally’ by inviting a Christian theologian each year from a cultural background outside Western Europe. The result has been an ongoing learning experience, an unpredictable expanding of horizons on the part of both the German hosts and their guests. Their initial formulation of their aims and objectives is worth quoting in full:

To do theology in an intercultural way means, on the one hand, thinking through what Christians and communities which are culturally determined in ways other than ours, and whose experiences with the Gospel are foreign to us, offer for our consideration. On the other hand it means that we always integrate into our own theological work what our experience with the Gospel prompts differently constituted Christians and communities to reflect on.
Doing theology interculturally may not be new in itself, but now that it has become a self-conscious activity we are going to need new perspectives and new methodologies to transform it into an explicit project. It will be necessary to overcome the deeply ingrained dichotomy between religions with written scriptures, systems of doctrine and wide geographical spread, usually characterised as ‘high’, ‘transcendent’ or ‘universal’, and religions in oral cultures, without scriptures or philosophies, localised, close to nature and centred around ritual, whose traditions are described as ‘indigenous’, ‘local’ or ‘primal’ (the designation ‘primitive’ has fortunately passed out of use). One needs classifications, of course, to work in any field as complex as the world’s religions, but it has always struck me that this distinction is particularly arbitrary and artificial. I was therefore greatly encouraged when I came across an article entitled “Aboriginal Religion as World Religion”, written by an anthropologist who wishes to get away from “an evolutionary framework situating some religions at one end as ‘primal’ and others at the opposite end as ‘developed’”. This schema becomes more sinister when one remembers that “the so-called world religions are the imperialist religions – the ones spreading out to incorporate others from a centre of self-evidency – and are often attached to imperialist societies – the ‘winners’ in history”. Of particular significance in this project will be those who have entered deeply into religious traditions other than their own and who are also conceptually equipped to reflect on their experience in such a way that they can mediate one tradition’s convictions to their own and others.

I.2 Much as in the way that Western articulations of theology were inculturated as they (re)-encountered other cultures through their missionary endeavours of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (and through their imperial projects), so too were the traditions and norms of Christian ethics reshaped by their encounters with other cultural values and moral traditions. Indeed one can see that through these encounters the traditional paradigm of Christian ethics has begun to be disrupted, although it also be conceded that Christianity continues to hold fast to the fiction of a universalist articulation of ethics, which owes more to the Western philosophical imaginary, (in both its Aristotelian/Thomistic and Kantian versions).
Through the 1950s, 60, and 70s the ethical debates were framed primarily in terms of a disjunction between what Christian belonging required, (e.g. marital fidelity and monogamy; resistance to female circumcision etc.,) and what was endorsed by local cultural/religious practices. (The debates that occurred simultaneously in Kenya and the UK about the practice of female circumcision among the Kikuyu are illustrative in this regard). Since the 1980s however a different dynamic is in evidence, with Christian theologians from Africa, Asia and Latin and South America questioning whether particular Western manifestations of Christian values, (for example monogamy being the primary/necessary expression of the value of marital fidelity) are the only forms that such values can take. For example, Paul Chummar, an Indian theologian working in Kenya, in a recent essay, argues that the imposition of Christian norms on traditional African forms of marriage has undermined the ethical system in many countries. He suggests that the characterisation of a relationship as being qualitatively different after the marriage ceremony collides with the way in which, in various African countries, marriage has traditionally been understood as a progressive reality; one that often involves the creation of a family and the garnering of the blessing of the community in advance of any formal ceremony. Indeed Chummar argues that the structure of African marriage is more appropriately aligned with the sacramental framework associated with ordination, rather than with the sacramental framework of Christian marriage, as it evolved from and within the western legal tradition.\(^{13}\) One could mention a host of other such examples of Christians from the global South challenging and developing the concrete ethical norms of Christianity (especially those concerned with human relationships, both intimate and political) and reinterpreting them in light of the multiple and variegated contexts in which the faith is lived today.

In addition to this sometimes radical questioning of the ways in which some Christian values have found expression in concrete moral norms, the processes of intercultural theology have also highlighted the limits of the traditional ethical frameworks of Christian theologies. Although various denominations have constructed ethical theory differently, this intercultural dynamic has had an equally profound and challenging effect on both the natural law and the reformed construal of the frameworks of ethical understanding. Thus for example Jean Porter commenting on how the natural law tradition has fared, concludes that “the claim that all moral traditions share a
fundamental core, which amounts to a universally valid morality, appears to me to be defensible only if the core in question is described at such a high level of generality as to be virtually empty, and even then, it is difficult to arrive at a statement of principles that would be universally acceptable. More challenging still however have been the questions that have come from post-colonial philosophers and theologians regarding the durability of the anthropological and epistemological assumptions that Western forms of Christianity have adopted, and that they have subsequently exported to the rest of the world. The work of Indian theorists Homi Bhabha and Bikhu Parekh, Congolese theologian Benezet Bujo, Vietnamese feminist Trinh Minh-ha, albeit from many different theoretical perspectives, challenge Christians to think differently about the conceptual apparatus that the tradition of theological ethics has adopted. Thus instead of conceptualising human identity as natural, singular and fixed, post-colonial feminists, including feminist theologians speak more of identity as being constructed, multiple and nomadic. Uma Narayan and Chandra Mohanty’s work on gender and human rights, together with Antony Kwame Appiah’s work on cosmopolitanism show how the moral understanding we ‘acquire’ is fractured, culturally-embedded and provisional, so that it may in fact be a nonsense to construct an ethical system that aspires to a form of moral knowledge that is objective and timeless, i.e. universalist. Theologians from African and Asian contexts, including Jean Marc Ela, Teresia Hinga, and Kwok Pui-Lan continue to remind us moreover that this moral knowledge and understanding is acquired by individuals who belong to situated communities, are themselves internally differentiated, open and changing, not monolithic, detached or immutable.

(It is not my intention to rehearse here debates about whether recognising the fact and depth of ethical pluralism leads inevitably to ethical relativism. I would just say by way of an initial explanation that I am inclined to think that such a construal of the issue is essentially a legacy from the kind of foundationalist philosophy that cannot be sustained).

Traditional Christian ethics, together with the liberal political theory that accompanied its global progress, allowed for a confidence that we knew what we were doing when we spoke about shared values in the pursuit of a shared future. (We spoke in terms of the truth of the Christian message and of what William Temple
called ‘the great world fellowship of Christians’). Today however we are more nervous of this kind of language, and are more hesitant about the idea of shared values in the pursuit of a shared future, notwithstanding the irony of the fact that our respective futures are more closely tied today than at any other time in history. Nonetheless we do need to consider whether such ideas still have a resonance in light of the inculturaltion of theology. Indeed we need to ask on what basis we can construct a shared political future? Can we proceed in the hope that we can articulate a set of shared values? If so how do we go about this – especially given the failures of our great ‘civilizing’ projects of the past? What role will the different religions play in this process? On what basis will Christianity play a role? Will the secularist assumptions of Western liberalism frame how ‘the public square’ is conceptualised, thereby according religion a private but not public role? Moreover even if the public square is acknowledged as religiously plural, rather than neutral (in both its global and manifold local manifestations) will the different religions have the capacity to engage in the kind of dialogue and debate that will necessarily precede any articulation of a shared future based on shared values? These are critical questions for ecumenics as we try to envision its possibilities as an ethical as well as a theological discourse, and as we leave behind the reductive putative (faux) universalism of previous centuries.

II. Ecumenics as Interreligious Theology

II.1 The concept of ‘interreligious witness’ is pregnant with implications for the whole enterprise of ecumenics. The one thing that was neither permitted nor even anticipated in classical missiology was that they would bear witness to us of spiritual truths and efficacious practices which they had but we didn’t and which were salvific independently of the Christian dispensation. For Catholics, a crack of light appeared as Vatican II opened the door to relationships with other faiths beyond domination and conversion. Turning to “those who have not yet received the gospel”, the Constitution on the Church says: “Whatever goodness or truth is found among them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the gospel. She regards such qualities as given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life” (Lumen Gentium 16), and the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions is slightly more explicit: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions” (Nostra Aetate 2). These were historic and unprecedented
as statements of the *magisterium*, but they stop well short of saying that religious traditions that can be recognised as authentic (raising the question: on whose criteria?) have things to offer one another which are not just ‘functionally equivalent’ or ‘the same thing’ in different forms, but unique and irreplaceable ways of salvation. What the council had in view was more effective evangelisation leading to conversion, and this was strongly reinforced by *Dominus Iesus* (2000).\(^{26}\)

The question is sharpened considerably when one considers the uses of religious language. Especially when one is fully aware of traditions very different from one’s own, what does one say when comforting the sick, burying the dead, solemnising marriage or initiating the young? In such situations people do not want abstract generalisations about ‘pluralism’ or interpretations of religious idioms which have to be explained. They want language that comes from the heart and goes straight to the heart of people at turning points in their lives, and this is only possible in a shared language that is in secure possession of all concerned. True, ‘civil celebrants’ of weddings and funerals are adept at addressing the meanings and values involved without mentioning anything ‘religious’, but for those who are not allergic to religion a watered down version of their particular faith tradition will not do.

This came home to me powerfully at a time when I was privileged to be a member of the Irish Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, which almost uniquely included clergy and lay people, Catholics and Protestants, men and women from the north and south of Ireland. In preparing the document that was published under the title *Burying Our Dead*, we learned how excruciatingly difficult it could be – especially for clergy who were convinced ecumenists – to find words at the funeral services of republican or loyalist activists who had been killed by the security forces, loyalist paramilitaries or the IRA.\(^{27}\) Was one to revert to being a ‘chaplain to the tribes’,\(^{28}\) or could one on such an occasion help one’s congregation to go beyond thoughts of retaliation by pointing to aspects of one’s own Christian tradition that forbid vengeance and urge reconciliation? Similar dilemmas must have been faced by many in apartheid South Africa, in Rwanda, in Central America, in the many dialogue groups in Israel-Palestine or – in Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim contexts – in Sri Lanka and India.
Quite apart from the all-pervading influence of what Charles Taylor calls our ‘secular age’, the questions we are identifying are endemic to any use of religious language. As Francis D’Sa puts it, “The religions must become more poetic and less dogmatic or doctrinaire”, or in the words of Paul Knitter, “If the Buddhists are right that all our words are fingers pointing to the moon and not the moon itself, then all our words about God are symbols”, and if it is true that “Historical events … form the bedrock of Christianity … then this bedrock of history must come alive as the poetry of symbol”. This faces pastors, in the first instance, but also theologians with a considerable challenge: How does one draw upon the resources of one’s own tradition and those of others to create statements of faith which will address situations fraught with emotion, whether joyful or sorrowful, in a way that is fresh yet recognisably authentic? In such cases one is not called upon to define the literal meaning of sentences from the creed but to ‘use’ religious language with an immediacy that transcends literalness. At the same time, unless such language remains recognisable – as Buddhist, Christian, Muslim – it loses the emotional power that comes from its very particularity.

In real life contexts we are never dealing with ‘religion in general’ but with people’s religion in all its particularity, just as nobody speaks ‘language in general’ but always some particular language. But just as linguistic diversity is intrinsic to culture, so religious plurality is intrinsic to faith. Looked at in this light, it is inconceivable that faith could have only one valid expression. It follows that no theological language can be valid in isolation from all the many others – unless one is prepared to succumb to fundamentalism, for this is what it is: the forced elimination of religious interdependence, the denial that religion, too, has its principle of relativity. Religious truth is not so much a universe as a pluriverse, a complex of expressions of faith produced by human cultures which may ultimately be complementary. Hence the relevance of more recent reformulations of interreligious relations in terms such as ‘humility’, ‘empathy’ and ‘hospitality’. These are softer terms than the hard-edged categories of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, and they leave more scope for the negotiation of meanings in the practice of dialogue. The concept of empathy, in particular, which was central to the life and philosophy of Edith Stein, is emerging as the paradigm of a new ‘empathic civilisation’ to supersede the Ages of Faith and Reason.
In his extraordinary book *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian* Paul Knitter remarks: “Maybe some day a Buddhist will write a book with the title *Without Christ I Could not be a Buddhist!*”\(^{33}\) If that ever happens, we will know we are well on the way to interreligious witness. As it is, numerous examples of religious ‘double belonging’ provide ample inspiration for interreligious theology. There is already much activity in the field that has come to be called ‘comparative theology’,\(^ {34}\) though what I envisage is something more like a ‘collaborative theology’ which would not stop short at identifying similar ways of tackling similar or perhaps identical problems but would actually set about doing so. Representatives of different faiths would thus deploy their inherited resources *together*, working out the methodology for doing so as they went.\(^ {35}\) When we look around us, freeing ourselves from the shackles of exclusivistic meliorism, we see that there is almost endless scope for such collaboration.

**II. 2** This deep religious plurality also shapes our global and local conversations about how human dignity can best be protected; and is also the context within which the moral subject functions. Religiously-derived assumptions about the nature and structuring of human dignity are deeply rooted in the sacred texts and doctrines of different religious traditions and find expression not only in the norms that determine social roles, but also in what Bourdieu calls the *habitus*, i.e. dispositions that are inculcated, structured, durable and, of course, generative. This irreducible pluralism among religious traditions is further complicated, moreover, by the significant pluralism within religion.

It may seem strange to be reminded about the pluralism within religious traditions while the focus is on interreligious concerns. However I want to suggest that it is vital that we remain attentive to this pluralism within, even as our conversations are oriented outwards. The acknowledgement of the pluralism within religious traditions serves as a powerful reminder of the constructed-ness of religion; and conversations and processes that aim at meaningful inter-religious dialogue ignore the ‘constructed-ness’ of religious traditions at their peril. Interreligious theology needs the inclusion of a genealogical perspective on religion so that there is an acknowledgment that each religion's distinctive world-view and ethic is embedded in political processes that
have involved choices between various and varying interpretations of the community's history; power struggles over the authorisation and legitimation of the community's traditions; disagreements about the criteria for belonging; and debates about where the power to define the limits of the tradition resides.

The space for inter-religious communication and dialogue will inevitably be enlarged, I would suggest, when it is acknowledged that religious traditions are not pre-discursive entities that provide a refuge from the politics of knowledge; but rather when religions are accepted as being the products of historical and political processes through which their distinctiveness is constructed, and according to which the parameters of orthodoxy are drawn. Indeed this is especially true in respect of inter-religious communication on ethical issues since the evolutionary nature of each religion’s moral doctrines is especially clear to see. Consider, for example John Noonan’s précis of the evolution of the RCC’s moral doctrine:

“what was forbidden became lawful (the cases of usury and marriage);
what was permissible became unlawful (the case of slavery);
what was required became forbidden (the persecution of heretics)”.

Studies in comparative religious ethics confirm that a similar trajectory is in evidence in the other major world religions. Of course the politics of this history, especially the politics of the history of doctrine is often obscured, or even denied, by religious authorities, who prefer to present an apolitical account of how the parameters of the tradition were, and continue to be drawn. The fact that religious authorities frequently refuse to recognise the inescapably constructed nature of their traditions, does not, however make it less true.

If we are to have a viable inter-religious communication about ethical issues then the manner in which we seek this communication is of critical importance. John suggested earlier that ‘religious truth is not so much a universe as a pluriverse, a complex of expressions of faith produced by human cultures which may ultimately be complementary’. And in many respects as we embark on inter-religious communication we hold fast to this conviction that our manifold expressions of faith may be complementary. However even if we conclude that they are complementary, it is possible that certain ethical values and commitments will turn out to be
incommensurable, and that they will continue to be contested. However inter-religious theologies cannot shy away from these areas of dissonance and ambiguity. Moreover if one holds, as I do, that shared values will only emerge through a dialogical engagement between multiple situated, historical communities, including religious communities, that are open to internally and externally generated social criticism, then one must be prepared to sit lightly to inherited and conventional expressions of religious witness, all the while keeping faith with the eschatological promise of redeemed humanity.

In the field of ethics the complexities involved in trying to tackle “similar problems in similar ways” are manifold. Of course John is right that this would involve the deployment of our manifold inherited resources together, and working out the methodology for doing so as we go. However even as we embark on the conversations to establish the basis of comparative religious ethics, not to mention ‘collaborative ethics’ we will need not only to learn, but also to unlearn. It has often seemed to me that many of the disagreements in ethics, especially those that have consistently been the most contentious in cross-cultural and inter-cultural settings, make the erroneous assumption that we know what is at stake, for the other, in the debate. In fact many of our cross-cultural debates are premised on naïve ethical comparisons, comparisons which assume that the meanings and values that are at stake for us, in the case, for example, of child labour, or purdah, or cosmetic surgery, or in vitro fertilisation, are also those that are at stake for our interlocutors. Yet these are precisely the assumptions which, left unexamined, make meaningful communication difficult, if not impossible. Despite this however, very little work has been done to interrogate the categories on which much of our cross-cultural ethical debate is premised.

Take for example the matter of bodiliness and its significance for ethics. A number of years ago John and I wrote a paper entitled ‘Gender and Culture as Dimensions of Bodiliness,’ in which we argued that ‘the body’ as understood in any cultural tradition is always a social construct, and that it is through the inscriptions of culture, religion and other social processes that ‘the matter’ of the body acquires its ethical significance. Moreover the meanings ascribed to the body; the ways in which embodiment shapes identity; and the ethical significance assigned to bodiliness have
varied widely, both historically and culturally. One example will suffice. It is evident that, within the cultural context of the West, the body is understood primarily through the lens of sexuality. This is true in both the secular and religious domains, and is something that Foucault saw clearly. Indeed one might suggest that we have privileged the sexual meaning of our bodies, to the exclusion of almost every other meaning. Moreover not only have we privileged a sexual interpretation of bodiliness, but within this sexual interpretation, we have privileged sexual pleasure. The merits or otherwise of this aspect of Western culture is not at issue here; rather the purpose is to illustrate how the meaning of ‘being or having a body’ is culturally constructed. In the field of ethics this is especially pertinent since a great proportion of ethical debate revolves around the moral significance of embodiment. The debate about whether female genital cutting amounts to a violation of human rights is one example of a debate in which different, cultural and religious understandings of embodiment collide. The frame of reference of much of the debate about female genital cutting has been in relation to the body as first and foremost the site of sexual meaning, specifically sexual pleasure. Yet this has a peculiarly Western resonance, and is rarely the lens through which the women in whose cultures female genital cutting is practised, debate the issue. Other cultural and religious traditions may embed the dynamics of sexuality differently and as a result may articulate the meaning of the body, and of the practice of cutting that body according to other frames of reference.

To say that we are concerned about the same thing, i.e. the meaning of embodiment, simply misses the point. Embodiment, i.e. the fact of being in a body, has had radically different meanings and resonances cross-culturally. However the naturalisation of these constructions often means that we are not only blind to our own assumptions, but, in addition, we neither recognise nor seek to discover other ways of viewing and valuing the body. [ref. to our article on ‘constructing the human’ in Concilium?] A similar point could be made about many of the categories that ground and structure our inter-cultural and inter-religious conversations: including how what we in the West call the public and the private domains are distinguished; or how the individual and community are understood to relate.

In his groundbreaking study in comparative ethics twenty years ago, Lee Yearley analysed the virtue of courage in the writings of both Aquinas and Mencius (the 4th century Confucian philosopher) and observed that what he was trying to do was to
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chart “similarities within differences and differences within similarities.” What I have been suggesting herein however is that the differences may be far more profound than we have heretofore understood. The practice of comparative ethics is but one component (albeit an important one) in the process of interreligious communication and needs to be pursued in parallel with intercultural hermeneutics and also with processes that are analogous to ‘scriptural reasoning’, wherein the rationalities embedded in the various ethical traditions can be engaged in the pursuit of greater understanding. We cannot short-circuit the process, nor can we rely on interpretations and translations that have been built on essentialist foundations. Rather we must proceed with caution, aware that theology done interreligiously will require not only that we learn, but also that we unlearn.

III. Ecumenics as Public Theology

III.1 ‘God in public’ tends to cut a somewhat disconsolate figure these days. The public sphere, as it was constituted in the emerging pluralist societies of modern Europe, was less and less hospitable to religion as a factor in public life, precisely because the power of the church had to be curbed and the plurality of ‘denominations’ had a potential for conflict which was better neutralised before it could become virulent. In civil society, the intermediate sphere in which individuals, through established organisations or ad hoc movements, can communicate with government and influence policy-making, the religions are on a more or less equal footing with other public bodies. Even in the few remaining cases where there is an established church, this too is one voice among many in public debate. In principle, this is the case in India, with its secular constitution, or in Indonesia, which refused to make Islam a state religion, though in other Islamic societies such as Iran or Saudi Arabia the situation is very different.

What we must now anticipate is the emergence of a global civil society with a public sphere far more complex than the secular-liberal democracies of the West. As Linda has already indicated, there are no grounds for presuming that this global space will be secular or ideologically neutral, nor will it necessarily produce ethical conduct on the part of states, corporations and other interest groups. Achieving the ‘globalisation of ethics’ or an ‘ethical globalisation’ is a task whose enormity is only beginning to
dawn on us. The ecological crisis brought about by heedless industrialisation and the exploitation of resources has now been complemented by an economic crisis of global proportions which can be traced back directly to the ethical vacuum at the heart of world financial markets. Underlying both of these, we are proposing, is an ecumenical crisis in which the very norms and values that could help us come to grips with the ordering of social and political life on a planetary scale are discredited by the behaviour of the religious communities which have transmitted them to us. Unless the religions learn to rise to the challenge of global pluralism and constructive interrelatedness, we face the bleak prospect of a plethora of rigid fundamentalisms, incapable of accommodating otherness and unable to enter the public sphere except to reinforce their obsessions and do battle with all who differ from them. The admittedly large claim being made is that the religions, to the extent that they can enter into empathetic relationships with one another, can make not only a moral but a political contribution to warding off the threat of fundamentalism while providing international relations with some purchase in humanity’s attempts to establish the bases of civilised behaviour in the global public forum. The religions can confront politicians and the powerful, nationally but now also internationally in the inchoate global order, with serious questions about the normative presuppositions of their policies. Declarations of war, ecological destruction, economic irresponsibility, the wanton elimination of species, languages and cultures – all these and many other evils of globalisation may then no longer be rationalised with spurious neoliberal justifications (freedom of choice, economic growth at all costs, individual property rights). When asserting the dignity of the human, the inviolability of nature and the common good, the religions – at their best – are bringing to bear on these problems historically rooted and communally tested value orientations. But this potential will only be realised if the religions prove themselves in dialogue, both with one another and with the secular accounts of meaning provided by the natural and social sciences.

We call this the ‘ecumenical alternative’ to both religious extremism and liberal tolerance with its ideology of neutrality. It implies that the religions engage with one another on a basis of mutual recognition rather than each asserting its claim to be uniquely ‘saving’ and ‘true’. What we envisage is more than an ethic of survival to which the religions would contribute along the lines of Hans Küng’s ‘global ethic’, important as this initiative was. What needs to happen is that the religions commit
themselves to overcome their deeply ingrained patriarchalism and absolutism. In making progress towards this goal the Enlightenment heritage of the West and the implementation of human rights as the expression of inalienable human dignity provide an indispensable foundation which the religions can validate from their own traditions. But their truly unique contribution will be the vision of hope which drives and inspires all such moral idealism.\(^4^2\) The key ecumenical point is that no one religion may any more imagine that it can achieve this on its own. Quite apart from the fact that the task is too great, the very fact of the presence of the others compels each tradition to express its deepest convictions in a conversation, a process of mutual translation, with them.

The fact that this conversation must henceforth take place ‘in public’, in the proliferating global media of the electronic age, has the potential to transform the ways in which the religions speak and even think about God or however else they symbolise ultimate reality. The transformations presently taking place in communication on a global scale amount to a revolution on a par with the introduction of printing around the time of the European Reformation. Talk of God does not always sit easily with these new media. The American televangelists and their counterparts in Asia and Latin America saw immediately that their brand of dramatic, emotion-charged worship (and fundraising) is made to order for the electronic media; carrying on the kind of conversation envisaged here in these media is another matter altogether. The ecumenical alternative is anything but a soft option. Whether in conflict mediation or the patient understanding of differences and the interests they mask, interreligious work is difficult and delicate. Francis D’Sa puts it bluntly:

No religion really understands the other religion. All attempts to understand the other are undertaken within the framework of one’s own religion. And secondly: Religions seem to be incapable of understanding themselves from the other’s point of view. The result is any amount of mutual misunderstanding, based on suspicion and stereotypes.\(^4^3\)

Yet the ethical contribution the religions can make depends crucially on the spiritual quality of their relationships with one another. Positive and constructive interreligious relationships are not merely the afterglow of a Götterdämmerung as the religions sink
into irrelevance, but are the result of reciprocal engagement and the hard work of overcoming barriers to understanding in situations of mutual recrimination, such as obtained in Northern Ireland and still threatens the small groups struggling to maintain dialogue in the Middle East, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, the Philippines and many other such contexts. Yet the imperative of dialogue is not simply a pragmatic corollary of conflict, whether local or global. It derives directly from the religions’ own responsibilities to themselves and to one another. In interreligious relationships we are not dealing only with descriptive content and abstract concepts, but with commitment to truth, albeit necessarily expressed in the very particular languages and cultural symbols of each tradition. Just as it is difficult to learn other languages without an initial proficiency in at least one language, so in the ecumenical field: without some idea of what it is like to adhere to a particular religion it is difficult to grasp why religion matters – and why religious diversity is often regarded by the religions themselves as a problem. Each religious heritage is precious, and it is a primary task of every tradition to hand on an intact understanding of it to successive generations. Indeed, viewed from within a religious tradition it can seem like disloyalty even to entertain the idea that other traditions are worth understanding in their own right, even before we acknowledge that they might well complement our own convictions about the truth of things and the right way to live.

What is the place of the religions in the coming global society? The current crisis of globalisation – indeed, the suspicion that globalisation is the crisis – makes the question more urgent than ever. We need to find ways of engaging with one another’s spiritual and ethical heritages without assuming that the other is inferior while at the same time regarding the other as a threat to our own integrity and uniqueness. We must learn to conceive of universality as interdependence, so that the universalism we aim at will be dialogical and intersubjective; the pluralism to which we aspire must be interactive rather than static; we need to accept that the consensus towards which we are working will be multidimensional and transcultural. If the religious traditions are to civilise globalisation and globalise ethics, we must learn to practise a political ecumenism of the religions.

In the eyes of at least some political scientists, such as John Keane, José Casanova and Richard Falk, the arena for these developments will be a global civil society –
not simply a reproduction of Western liberal democracy at a global level, but a search for appropriate institutions to structure a world society and regulate the global economy. It will not be a global government, but it will require enhanced competence in global governance. Global civil society could well turn out to be no more than oases of freedom and resistance in a desert of violence and oppression; it could be the playground of racism, ethno-nationalism and fundamentalism – or an arena of humanisation, spirituality and transcendence. If the latter, then it is inconceivable without the active participation of the religions – but only if they overcome their isolationism, absolutism and meliorism.

At a conference on Christians in the technical and social and revolutions of our time, held in Geneva in 1966, the World Council of Churches suggested that the churches could “experiment for the whole of society”. What we now envisage is the religions experimenting for the whole of global civil society in the ways they relate to one another and address the problems common to humanity on our fragile planet. Is this mere idealism – or elementary realism? It is our conviction that this is in fact the only non-violent way into the future, to a universalisable ethic that could humanise globalisation and ground it in nature.

III.2 Equivocation and ambiguity continue to shape inter-religious and inter-denominational conversations. The memories of violent and exploitative relationships continue to reverberate and cannot be ignored even as we try to envision different ways of relating. Those of us who are the inheritors of the (at best misguided and at worst pernicious) legacy of Christian imperialism face the complex task of continuing to witness to the gospel while facing squarely the violence which that witness has entailed. The patterns we have adopted in the past do not suffice. Moreover, even as we devise new models, methodologies and hermeneutical practices, we will need to guard against the construction of new stereotypes and mythologies. Nor should we expect too much from these rational discursive processes. Notwithstanding their potential, it is unlikely that reason alone will deliver consensus on such fundamental issues. Indeed it may be that ultimately it will be not our ability to engage in intellectual debate, but rather our capacity to imaginatively inhabit the world of the other that will secure the kind of shared political culture about which we have spoken. Moreover it may be the poets and painters, even more than the politicians and the
priests, who will be able to capture the texture of the ethical sensibilities that are at stake, and who will articulate, mediate and translate the manifold resonances of religious belonging.

As we attempt to envision ecumenics as intercultural, interreligious and public theology we become aware of how profoundly unsettling such a process is. Indeed the dynamic embedded in such conversations will inevitably force us to confront some of our most enduring vulnerabilities, namely, the vulnerability of identity and the vulnerability of belonging. In his remarkable book *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* Jonathan Lear considers ‘what it would mean for one's culture to collapse, and with it the very conceptual field by which one navigates the world?’ Through his analysis of the demise of a particular culture Lear explores how the virtues intrinsic to a particular tradition might endure despite the irrevocable loss of the practices that sustained them. Lear’s analysis is wrought through the autobiographical narrative of Plenty Coups, the last traditional chief of the Crow Nation, although the questions he raises go to the heart of the fears and anxieties that are embedded in inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue: the fear that the narratives through which one understands the world and one’s place in it might someday be destroyed. Although the Crow nation was destroyed, Lear finds in the narrative a confirmation of the legitimacy of what he calls ‘radical hope’, and what makes hope radical is “that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends [our] current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it.”

The ‘ecumenical alternative’ which we have been sketching undoubtedly will require such a radical hope, although the question remains: ‘what would it be for such hope to be justified?’

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1 The correlation of ‘metacosmic’ and ‘cosmic’ religion is basic to the thinking of the extraordinarily creative Sinhalese theologian Aloysius Pieris SJ; see J.D. May, *Transcendence and Violence: The Encounter of Buddhist, Christian and Primal Traditions* (New York and London: Continuum, 2003); *id.*, “Cosmic Religion and Metacosmic Soteriology: The ‘Completion’ of Interreligious Dialogue by Primal Traditions”, Robert Crusz, Marshal Fernando and Asanga Tilakaratne, eds., *Encounters with the Word: Essays to Honour Aloysius Pieris SJ on his 70th Birthday* (Colombo: Ecumenical Institute for
Study and Dialogue; Aachen: Missionswissenschaftliches Institut Missio; Nürnberg: Missionsprokur der Jesuiten, 2004), 351-364.

2 This is a key thesis in the stimulating book by Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (London: SCM, 1985): European theology is not simply normative but is an historical succession of local theologies.


10 See David Turner, “Aboriginal Religion as World Religion: An Assessment”, *Studies in World Christianity* 2/1 (1996), 77-96, in which he reviews a number of his earlier essays on this and related subjects.


15 Homi Bhabha


Trinh Minh-ha,
The term nomadic is Italian feminist Rosi Braidotti, though the radical constructedness of human identity is something one finds among authors writing especially from an Indian perspective, including Spivak, Bhabha and Mohanty.
Uma Narayan
Chandra Mohanty
Jean Marc Ela
Teresia Hinga
Kwok Pui-Lan
“Burying Our Dead: Political Funerals in Northern Ireland”, Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, *Breaking Down the Enmity: Faith and Politics in the Northern Ireland Conflict*. (Belfast: Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, 1993), 165-178. The task was made more difficult because, while Catholic funerals offer prayers for the soul of the departed, Protestant funerals give thanks for his or her life; Catholic funerals for paramilitaries therefore scandalise Protestants, while Protestant funerals are incomprehensible to Catholics, 168.

John Noonan Jr., “Development in Moral Doctrine” in James F Keenan and Thomas A Shannon eds., *The Context of Casuistry*, (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1995), 194. Whether one examines the Roman Catholic church’s teaching on marriage, on divorce, on abortion, on slavery, on human rights, on conscientious objection to war or on religious freedom one encounters an always evolving, often inconsistent, and occasionally contradictory body of thought. Previously unquestioned positions have been abandoned and substantial innovations have occurred. Moreover, not only have the conclusions about the morality of certain practices changed, but in addition the ethical frame within which many practices are evaluated has also been transformed. Of course it would be wrong to overstate the trajectory of change in the evolution of this and other moral traditions for it is precisely as tradition that they evolve. Nonetheless the church’s moral teaching is best understood as a discursive tradition forged through an ambiguous dynamic of continuity and change.

Western feminism has played its part in this since its response to the cultural denigration of the female body has focused on the revalidation of the female body and of sexual pleasure. The practice is afforded multiple meanings among those cultures in which it is practiced, and the idea that circumcision attenuates sexual desire is but one of the many beliefs in evidence. Sometimes it is embraced in cultures where it is practised as a ‘technology of the body’ that is, integral to the scaffolding network of equilibrating values. L Amede Obiora, “Bridges and Barricades: Rethinking Polemics and Intransigence in the Campaign Against Female Circumcision” *Case Western Reserve Law Review,* 47, No. 2, Winter 1997, 277-387.


D’Sa, “Glaube”, 127.
