



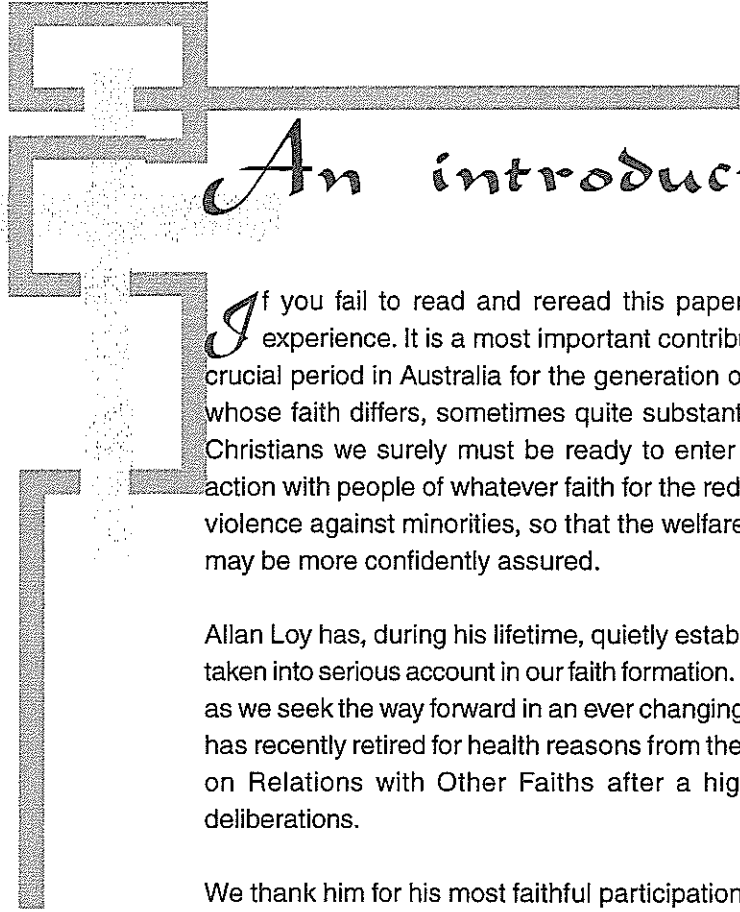
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WITH OTHER FAITHS

Christianity
among the religions:
trying to live theologically
through a half century

By Allan Loy

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An introductory word

If you fail to read and reread this paper you will have missed a valuable experience. It is a most important contribution to our thinking and acting in a crucial period in Australia for the generation of positive relationships with people whose faith differs, sometimes quite substantially from our own. As responsible Christians we surely must be ready to enter into creative dialogue and shared action with people of whatever faith for the reduction of tension and elimination of violence against minorities, so that the welfare and security of future generations may be more confidently assured.

Allan Loy has, during his lifetime, quietly established himself as a theologian to be taken into serious account in our faith formation. Now he offers us a serious challenge as we seek the way forward in an ever changing world. Allan, an inaugural member, has recently retired for health reasons from the National Assembly Working Group on Relations with Other Faiths after a highly significant contribution to its deliberations.

We thank him for his most faithful participation and tenacity as we have sought to deal with fundamentally challenging issues.

This is the first of our anticipated series of occasional papers on significant issues in our relations with people of differing faith traditions.

Bern Stevens
Chairperson

May 1997

Arrival in Bombay fifty years ago was a radical new experience which began to challenge preconceptions almost immediately.

Beginning to understand something of a culture incredibly old but very much alive, coming to terms with several of its languages, realising that within and behind the remarkable diversity of the Hindu religion was a philosophical tradition of great age and sophistication, understanding something of a religion that held remarkable diversity in a cultural wholeness - all this was a stark challenge to any person arriving there to present Christianity! The limited level of theology and philosophy I had garnered in a few short years was hardly up to the task! Some time later, reflecting on that early experience, it seemed to me that three questions had been embedded in it.



First, is there some necessary relation between Jesus Christ and Western forms of Christianity? Is it possible to present the Christian faith without the clothing of the Western world? The dignity of the West requires fine clothes for Sunday worship, but not so Hinduism; nakedness may be part of the final journey of the Hindu 'holy man'. There must always be great cultural variety in the transmission of the gospel but where does the variety end? In 1913 Farquhar wrote in the book, *The Crown of Hinduism* that "the thought of the West is fatal to Hinduism"¹. But despite Farquhar's erudite and positive grasp of the religion, three thousand year old Hinduism merely smiled. It is striking how the stark form of idolatry stands out from that title now, claiming Christianity as Hinduism's crown! It would reckon to identify Christian gospel and Western culture as one. Yet, at that time at least, such a statement would ring true for most western Christians. When I looked back some time later, it seemed probable, ironically, that the first of the questions troubling me in the new situation, submerged but at work, was this: What is the relation of Jesus Christ to Christianity?

The second question was the inverse of the first: In what way may the gospel speak in, with and through Hindu culture as it addresses the Hindu person? When C.F. Andrews, of considerable Christian stature in India, was asked how he preached the gospel to the Hindu, he said, "I don't! I preach the gospel to a man." Here the gospel is seen not only as unfettered by cultural transmission and pure from heaven, but also able to directly bypass Hinduism's world inside the person. Is it possible to think of a Hindu person's responsibility and freedom having some bare, essential form, not shaped inside the network of Hindu history and meaning? Curiously, the second submerged question was: What is the relation of Jesus Christ to Hinduism?

Third, where may one find the Christian gospel, free in itself and beyond any and all cultural formations? This question was certainly present then, barely hidden and without shape behind the previous two. It registered its tremors persistently in troubling uncertainty. If the final truth is given only in and through relative human capacities, if it may never be grasped in its essential form but only in its changing human expressions, what is it that persists and how may we be sure of it? The Christian may make a **faith-claim** which is reckoned to mediate an absolute demand, but he/she is making a **faith-claim** which is formulated in and through the relativities of human thought and expression. Paul Knitter, well-known for his present writing on dialogue between religions, wrote in a recent article: "There is no such thing as a cold hard fact. To know is to interpret"². Christianity and Hinduism offer each its own kind of transcendence - the capacity to get above life and shape it. Can both give it? Can either give it? Can Hinduism and Christianity overlap to a degree, at least sufficient

to understand one another in working together on public issues in the modern world? Is the inmost message of each so much part of its particular culture that such inmost message could never be pulled out in either case, so that each religion could have a good look at one another in freedom from the contrasting cultures? Ironically again, the third submerged but real question for me was: What is the relation between Christianity and Hinduism?

A decade later, including five years among Indian people in Fiji, and back now in the theological classroom, these questions were set down in three single, bare sentences in order to begin again. Several years on, a major writing programme was carried through to deal with the relation of Christianity and other religions in the framework of Barth's theology - an effort about which I have always since been ambivalent, denying yet affirming it; affirming yet denying it. Now, thirty more years on, the three original sentences have been fleshed out once more, as above, in order to make the point that they are standard, unresolvable, ever-living questions. Wherever one goes in the Christian journey they are there, but their dress is never more than a question mark. They do no explaining; they just keep on asking. If we do not see their shadowy forms, we can take it for granted that they have melted away because they will have nothing to do with facile Christian triumphalism. But they will be back to poke us in the ribs when we are not awake to what is happening around us and are quite satisfied with our properly dressed and very dignified Christian religion.

2

In a recent article, Jerald Brauer sets out three theological issues which have continuity with the past but imply marked change for the future³. That the three issues raised are the same three kinds of questions as those above and are set out in the same order, confirms their ever-present reality and their taunting nature.

Brauer's article was written for a conference held in 1989, of seventy theologians from around the world on the theme of "Paradigm Change in Theology"⁴. He points out that there is a very great difference between our period and that of the Reformation. He characterizes the projected task of the conference as "beginning with the assumption that Christianity has undergone a series of especially radical changes in the last century and a half; that it is still in the midst of those changes; and that "something new is emerging"⁵.

The title given for the conference, 'Paradigm Change in Theology' would seem to imply that radical change in culture will affect what I have referred to above as 'the inmost message' of a religion, at a level of real significance. 'To know is to interpret', so both answer and protest go on and on between religion and culture. The Christian gospel is never simply something in itself out there, fixed and absolute; it lives in interpretation. Even its origin and history are themselves expressed only as interpreted. From the beginning, experiencing, understanding and articulating go on in every expression of it.

3

Brauer's first issue is that there is a "massive presence of pluralism in the modern world and in all forms of Christianity today"⁶. This is another form of the first of the three questions which assailed me early on in India: If Christianity has many cultural forms, which does Jesus Christ choose for relation and which are rejected? Hinduism confronts one in India with the kind of impact of something not experienced before, not easily imagined from outside; but even so the impact is not of pluralism as such, but rather of religion's

massive presence. Hinduism presents itself in an incredible variety of forms and traditions and pervades life at all points. Islam presents itself as much more tightly woven but also as affecting every part of living. Today, as Brauer points out, with western imperialism on the wane, the older national states have experienced something of a rebirth, giving new life to their religions. For them, pluralism as such is not an issue. Hinduism revels in a variety of exchange and Islam has two major streams; but in neither case is 'pluralism' an issue in the sense or meaning of Brauer's use of the word.

In western society 'pluralism' is creating difference within Christianity that is much more radical than variety in Hinduism or Islam. Fifty years ago the various denominations kept to themselves, each reckoning to have hold of the one true form of Christianity. Today the situation has changed a great deal. "Pluralism is the self-conscious recognition within a tradition that though that tradition is shared by all members of a particular community, the way that it is interpreted, analysed and experienced varies even within that group"⁷. Pluralism in Christianity means that where there used to be one main core to every tradition since the Reformation, now each tradition finds that other traditions are represented in their life as well as the one 'true' one it has nurtured! And to some Christians that seems like finding a whole raft of awful weeds in their beautifully kept garden. Most church congregations today have people who differ considerably in their faith: fundamentalist, conservative, moderate, liberal or radical. Such pluralism has emerged in the last forty or fifty years.

At first sight the scene looks disastrous, and indeed, often it is so. One has only to read the editorial of the most recent issue of 'National Outlook', Australia's Christian monthly journal, to find such a picture. Its editor, Bill Neville, long a well known and gifted warrior for the church's responsibility in the public domain, gives the editorial the title: "The Worst of Times?" He refers to a decision that has transformed the Catholic Weekly in Sydney into a 'good news' newspaper.

"By this was meant that all mention of disagreement in the Catholic Church was out. Henceforth no discussion of contentious issues like calls for reform, women's ordination, clerical celibacy, creeping papal infallibility, etc. etc. Only the good news will be fit to print."

Neville comments that the Australian Anglican Church seems bent on divisions over ordination and lay presidency. He refers to a recent description of the Australian Anglican Church:

"We seem to be sliding into ever greater division and legalism in the Oz Church... There seem to be endless egos on parade, endless barrows squeaking their way up the hill, and endless pressure groups dedicated to making the church over into their own image"⁸.

Apparently the author of that statement indicates that he will be glad and relieved to come to retirement soon! The Uniting Church grapples with its raft of contentious issues, such as homosexuality and ordination, sexuality as such, the relation of church schools to the church, the church's public statements and its pressures in the social and political realm, the relation of the church to Jewish people, and the church's relation to the people of Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism in our society. Christians today live in the midst of pluralism in society and pluralism lives inside all mainline churches, putting new pressures of radical questioning on earlier ways of understanding and living the faith.

There is severe demand in this development, but there is a supervening value in it. It discounts heavily the sense of triumphalism that has been uppermost in the sensibility of the Christian Church all through its history and even into the present. This has been especially in evidence in the relation of the churches to the Jewish people. The NSW Council for Christians and Jews has been through tensions of the utmost kind recently, but still it holds together! Christians are being called, not to ask themselves whether beliefs and doctrines can be finally and absolutely true, but to live by the ones they espouse more in terms of sacrifice and relation than in terms of supposed infallibility. It is easy to believe; it is much harder to act. Act in relation puts strain on belief to find whether it will hold under the real test. Where triumphalism in belief fades into the background, act can move in to show the real quality of faith, rather than of overweening verbal proof. Faith always lives in relation; it must have trust from either side. Certainty from one end is invasive power reckoning on triumph at the other end. Where proof can be advertised in a loud and single voice, act calls for the sweat and strain of working together. When that happens one can forget about the awful business of absolute and final truth!

We should notice something of vital importance emerging in those last few sentences. Indeed 'act' and 'relation' are more primal and decisive than belief and doctrine. I recall that on a very early occasion of conducting worship in India the text was from Hebrews: "Son though he was, he learned obedience in the school of suffering" (5: 8) (Recall was possible because the Indian SCM published it). Apparently even at that early stage of experiencing a totally different religious world, I was looking for something more necessary and ultimate than belief and doctrine.



Brauer's second issue is that "a factor that radically sets off the contemporary situation is that Christianity finds itself in a quite new situation in relation to other religions"⁹. This represents our second question above: "What is the relation of Jesus Christ to Hinduism?" The most immediate form of that question now is how the churches of the western world may grapple with Christianity's appalling relation to Judaism, through the next fifty years.

From the scalding antipathy to the Jews that one can find in the gospels, there opens up a dreadful history of persecution through two thousand years. To understand something of that history the Christian needs to take time to reflect in such a way that he could imagine himself a Jew in Spain or Portugal in the fourteenth century. With Muslim rule, Jews had been free through more than five hundred years and scholarship had prospered among them, as it had among the Muslims. But when Catholic power supervened in the 14th century, Jews there were hunted down relentlessly by the instruments of the Inquisition of the Holy Catholic Church. In Spain, Jews faced baptism, emigration or death. In Portugal, they faced baptism or death.

Brauer puts the matter very plainly indeed:

Christianity has had a deplorable record with regard to its parent. If Judaism was both father and mother to Christianity, it has sought in an Oedipal way to slay its father and enslave its mother¹⁰.

The metaphor is powerful and points relentlessly to the fearful tangle of relation involved. Judaism is not dependent on Christianity and with the Hebrew Bible, it is whole in itself. Christianity depends on Judaism with the Hebrew Bible as part of its

life; it is dependent to a real extent on Judaism's scriptures. Christianity cannot continue to claim that it has superseded Judaism as in some sense leaving it behind in history while taking for itself Judaism's most prized possession. Judaism is very much alive in present history, ironically both despite the holocaust but also because of it. Moreover Jesus was a Jew, practising his prophetic faith in terms of the Hebrew scriptures. How is it possible for Christianity to claim that it superseded Judaism? If it cannot make such a claim, what happens to the central doctrine of Christology? At least, what can be said is that Christianity is being required to look at itself in much more critical terms than it has all through its triumphalist history. But in most of our congregations even the holocaust seems a kept secret! And how afraid we are of questioning doctrine!

This discussion is vital to the question of Christianity's relation to other religions. The reality, the fact, the presence of the other religions being there, in 'our' country, over against 'us' in their separate presence, participating in all the warp and woof of 'our' political and economic life, inevitably requires of us to take a much more penetrating look at ourselves as Christians. This is not now the earlier question of what is the relation of Jesus Christ to Hinduism in India; rather it is the more immediate question as to the form of Christianity's relation to the Hindu people around us and now settled in Australia. It is the question of our relation to the Muslim people and the Buddhist people who are now Australian citizens and building their sacred places precisely in order to continue to be Hindus and Muslims and Buddhists, in the Australian setting. And that kind of question awakens us more sharply than ever to the way in which Australians took over Aboriginal land through pillage and murder, committing fearful destruction of Aboriginal culture and religion. Perhaps worse, under government direction, children were taken from their mothers, on the reckoning that they would be assimilated eventually and disappear into white society. They were required to grow up as 'Christians'! Relation to other religions is an immediate question in our very midst in terms of great difference and variety.

How should Australian Christians see themselves relating to people of other faiths? It is curious that fifty years ago, it seemed quite in order to go to another country, another culture, another language, to persuade people there of the final truth of Christianity. Now, when such people are living in our midst, while we may relate to them in terms of community, or interest and help of one kind or another, it does not at all occur to us that we have any right to try to convert them to Christianity. They have the right to be themselves in their own way, within the parameters of law though not always of custom. And there should be grace around! We should not seek to trespass on their right to be themselves in their ancient ways, especially if they may not have the opportunity to draw ease of mind and inner strength from their original community and culture. For the same reason, I do not think it wise for Christians to gather people of other faiths and languages together to worship God, each in their own way. People usually wish to worship as in their own language and cultural pattern, as well as in their own religious setting. Interest happens best when people of different faiths come together on issues of justice, social ordering, the right to purchase property, or to deal with customs that may give rise to ethical or legal issues. If these take one further and into religious discussion, so be it! It is important for appointed leaders of the religions to come together for discussion, not directly on issues of religious faith and belief, but more particularly on issues arising in the public domain which may affect different groups in different ways.

In the Christian faith, act comes before belief. A theology of creation and of cross would support that view. Certainly act and belief belong together in symbiosis, but act has the priority and may break through the web of belief much more readily than

belief may shape act. What has Jesus Christ to do with Hinduism in our midst? Our first answer must be to affirm the Hindu in his/her own humanity on the basis of self-effacing, perhaps costly act. Jesus did not set out to make a Jew of the Samaritan in the parable; he affirmed him in his Samaritan humanity.

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Brauer's third issue: "A factor that marks the radicality of our epoch as against its immediate past is the question of the viability of religion itself"¹¹. He comments that "no epoch in history has thought more and written more about the demise of religion and the death of God." He refers to Eliade's most important book 'The Sacred and Profane', referring to the claim there that "modern man would never be satisfied until he had killed the last god." This presents our third question above: What is the relation of Christianity to Hinduism? When triumphalism falters and can no longer retain integrity, do we have the resources to live life in terms of the cross? Is it possible that religions, while retaining distinction in themselves, may so respect one another as to work together in presenting the sacred mode as over against and penetrating the profane mode.

It is certainly true that most people, including many who worship regularly, live from the resources of the profane world more than from the resources of the sacred. Technology's prolific creativity enables it to build its own world on the back of God's created order. It is the kind of world which can draw religion into its power of creating more and more interest in oneself and one's own comfort. A recent article by a person who converted from Judaism to the Christian faith some twenty years ago and who refers to himself as a "Jewish-Lutheran Christian theologian", carries out a broadside on the kind of religion in America that concentrates on cultivating self-interest.

Behind the smarmy-spiritual consumeristic prattle lies the assertion that God came in Jesus to benefit "you". He is here "for you". He died "for you". He forgives "you". He loves "you". He wants you to decide to accept him as "your" personal Saviour. All this emphasis on "you" sells well in a culture willing to purchase anything that offers more comfort and less pain¹².

It is interesting to notice that this trenchant criticism comes from a scholar who is well aware of the remarkable prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible. We should hear him further:

As a Jew and now a Christian, whose parents went through the Nazi Shoah and who is well aware of the indifference of the church in those days, I cannot help but hope that despite all the successful marketing of the American Jesus, there is something left in the DNA of the church that will cause it to wake up¹³.

There is nothing of 'the sacred' in the religion he criticises. It belongs in the profane world of concentrated self-interest.

Over against this we must affirm that there is, in Christianity, a true religion of the sacred. David Tracy is referring to it when he comments that "the truth of religion is, like the truth of its nearest cousin, art, primordially, the truth of manifestation"¹⁴. This is a religion of revelation, of enlightenment, even of mysticism. It has a history best represented by saints and scholars in Christian history. It is a religion of the 'sacred' as over against the 'profane'. But it does not breathe easily in the polluted air of modern society and does not work readily in the public domain.

The religion which represents the sacred as distinct from, but very much in the midst of the profane, is the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew bible and manifest in the life of the Jesus of the gospels. This is the kind of religion which most of all can be honest with itself and with its situation to renew the sacred and serve humanity. We should hear what Haar, the Jewish-Christian scholar, says in the final sentence of his article:

"This convert will go to his death hoping against hope that his conversion was not a mistake and that the God who redeems all humans to stand with their neighbours in pain is realized in the life of the church"⁵.



The article by Brauer, searching through its three points for a new paradigm, was purposefully brief and sought to do no more than point to three critical areas of responsibility for the churches. We have sought to extend them into the radical challenge they create for Christians today. In briefest form, they are these. Pluralism, not simply between denominations, but radical pluralism inside each of the main bodies, disables the triumphalism that claims Christianity as the one true and final religion. The fact of other religions, not in distant and exotic places, but in our midst and now part of our society, requires from us relation in trust and hope in the vicissitudes and blessings of our society. The threat to the very existence of religion in the modern world, where dominating power is everywhere present and where self-centred religion follows its trail, calls us to ask ourselves much more rigorously as to what is the heart of the Christian faith. Matthew Lamb points us to it in an article which also appears in "Paradigm Change in Theology". He warns:

*For the first time on this stage of world history, we humans can envisage the possibility... some would say the probability, of a self-inflicted abrupt and almost apocalyptic nuclear end of the human drama as we have known it... If the drama is to be interrupted redemptively rather than destructively, Christian theology, which has itself been enticed time and again to legitimate dominative power, can contribute to that future by mediating more dialectically to the present, the subversive memories of **God's identification with the struggles of victims everywhere in the mystery and message of Christ Jesus**¹⁵ (emphasis mine).*

This is the beating heart of the true Christian faith.

Christianity offers some stark contradictions to this faith. From the fifteenth century on, the so-called Christian West invaded and plundered the worlds of America, Africa and Asia. Julio Barriero, a Uruguayan professor of Political Sciences and a member of the Methodist Church in that country, writes in the book **Separation Without Hope**, published by the World Council of Churches in 1978:

*We must remember that before the Spanish and Portuguese arrived, Latin America was inhabited and **cultivated** - in the Latin sense of the word - by a rich indigenous stock... who were in no way inferior to those who claimed this title for themselves¹⁷.*

And the case today:

In many parts of Latin America, the trucks, planes and rifles of the multinational companies, have replaced the horses, armour and swords of the Spaniards and Portuguese. This is what is happening, for example, in vast areas of the

*Amazon, where the genocide of whole communities of Indians is taking place so that new conquistadores from the multinational companies can take over the great mineral and ecological wealth of the region*¹⁸.

It is not surprising that Liberation Theology had its origins in Latin America in the sixties as a response to this fearful history.

We have said that in our congregations the Holocaust is a kept secret. Elie Wiesel, most well-known Jewish writer on the Shoah, says:

*"As one who has tried for some twenty-five years on the subject, I feel I must confess to a sense of defeat. The witness was not heard. The world is world... our testimony has made no difference"*¹⁹.

The moment is surely here for Christianity to become much more radical in its self-appraisal. To say that its future depends on it, is of less importance than to say that living truth and world could depend on it. A theology living on the upper side of history has been called in question by volcanic ruptures from the under-side of history.

Footnotes

1. Farquhar, J.N. **The Crown of Hinduism**. London, Oxford, 1913, p. 42
2. Knitter, Paul, "Toward a Liberative Inter-religious Dialogue", *Cross Currents*, 45/4, Winter 1995, p. 451
3. Brauer, Jerald. "A New Paradigm for Theology", **Paradigm Change in Theology**. eds. Kung, H. and Tracy, D., T.&T. Clark, Edinburgh 1989, p. 205 ff.
4. *Ibid* p. 205
5. *Ibid*
6. *Ibid*
7. *Ibid*, p. 206
8. *National Outlook*, 18/3, May 1996, p. 32
9. *Op. cit.*, p. 207
10. *Ibid*
11. *Ibid*, p. 209
12. Haar, Murray Joseph, "Theology Today", 52/1, April '95. p. 109
13. *Ibid*, p. 111
14. "The Question of Criteria for Inter-Religious Dialogue", in **The Whirlwind of Culture**. eds. W. Musser & J.L. Price, Meyer-Stone Books, 1988, p. 258
15. *Ibid*. p. 112
16. Lamb, Matthew, "The Dialectics of Theory and Practice", **Paradigm Change in Theology**, p. 102 f.
17. **Separation Without Hope, Essays on the Relation Between the Church and the Poor in the Industrial Revolution** W.C.C. 1978, p. 129
18. *Ibid*, p. 134
19. Quoted by Susan Shapiro, in "Hearing the Testimony of Radical Negation", in **The Holocaust As Interruption**, eds., E.S. Fiorenza and David Tracy, T.&T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1984, p. 4

