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Disciplinary Brief

LOVING THE RELIGIOUS STRANGER WITH HUMILITY

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I thank Professor O'Donovan for such a rich and stimulating Theology Brief. I focus my remarks on one aspect of his Brief that is mentioned only briefly – love for the stranger. I think it is especially important that we think more on this in an age where there is so much fear and antagonism directed towards 'the other'.

Uncontrolling Radical Love

Tom Oord (2015) has a book called *The Uncontrolling Love of God*. I don't necessarily agree with everything in Tom's book, but I do agree with his central thesis that real love cannot be controlling. A response of genuine love has to be given freely, it cannot be coerced. Nor can genuine love seek to control the beloved.

So often with regard to 'the stranger' we want to love, but we want it to be on our terms, while maintaining control – our way of doing things, whether that control is about structures, forms of worship, or even the neat boxes of our theology. We may not see that the stranger may have something to offer that potentially enhances, and perhaps even transforms, our understanding, our worship, and our lives.

Jesus' teachings were far more radical than the laws about welcoming the stranger in the Hebrew Bible. We see this throughout the New Testament with the struggle to realise the full implications of the abolition of ritual purity laws and especially in the implications of Galatians 3:28 – that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. We've struggled with that for almost two thousand years.

When we think of breaking down those barriers and welcoming the stranger, it is so easy and natural for us to think in terms of us welcoming someone who is in a position of need relative to us, whether material or spiritual. So we welcome them from out of our benevolence, from our of our positions of power.

When we think of those who follow other religions, we especially as Christians may see ourselves in positions of privilege – unearned privilege through grace, to be sure, but privileged knowledge of God in Christ nonetheless. And as a Christian, I agree of course, that in Christ, a unique and supreme

manifestation of God is revealed to us. But from that position, I think it can be too easy for us to fall into the trap of lacking curiosity about what God has been doing over the millennia in other cultures. I come from a country, Australia, where the indigenous people have been living for at least 65,000 years. Do we imagine that God was silent on that vast continent until the British First Fleet showed up in 1788?

For those of us who have grown up in the historically Christian countries of the former Christendom, or its culturally Western offshoots, it can be difficult to discern the blurry line between authentic Christian teaching and practice, and the legacies of our Celtic, Greco-Roman, and Germanic cultural heritage. To truly love the stranger, we must be open and curious to learn of God's work among other cultures over the millennia, and to what they have learned of God.

Hints of God's Expansive Activity Among the Nations

There are many hints of God's expansive activity among the nations in scripture.

Let's remember the priest of "God Most High" Melchizedek, the King of Salem, who blessed Abrahm in Genesis 14. In Hebrews 5:6 the author recalls this figure, describing Christ as "a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." What exactly was this pre-Abrahamic, pre-covenantal priestly 'order of Melchizedek'? We will never know in this life, but clearly God had been at work.

Let's remember Jethro, Moses' father-in-law in Exodus 18, a Midianite priest. And Balaam, a Mesopotamian prophet to whom God spoke in Numbers 22-24.

Let's remember too the Magi from the East in Matthew chapter 2, strangers who came not as beggars needing food or shelter, but as wise men bearing gifts for Jesus – symbolic, I believe, of the enormous enrichment that other cultures have to offer the church.

In Acts 14 in the Galatian city of Lystra in Asia Minor, Paul and Barnabas tell the crowd that God has not left himself without a witness in doing good, giving them rains and fruitful seasons.

In Athens in Acts 17 Paul notes the Athenian altar to an 'unknown God' and recognises the sincerity of their devotion, saying "I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way" and then he explains who this unknown God is.

Being Curious About God's Work in Other Religions

I studied a Christian Bachelor of Theology in Australia when I was younger. When I came to Oxford I did an MPhil in Classical Indian Religion, focussed on the Sanskrit language, Hinduism, and Buddhism, and then did a DPhil comparing four of the Hindu yogic traditions and the extent to which they could ground a notion of universal human rights.

I want to briefly mention eight ways that I benefited from being curious about God's work with the stranger

in other religions,

Sophisticated Theology

The philosophers, theologians, and mystics of many of the non-Christian traditions are as sophisticated and devout as any we had in the West. There are rich technical theological vocabularies in Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, and Arabic – some for concepts that we don't even have words for in Greek, Latin, or English. Like observing a finely cut diamond through its different facets, engaging with these thinkers can enrich our faith. It can both enrich our theological toolkit and help us to sharpen what is distinctive about the Christian message.

Learning from the Theistic Hindu Traditions

There is an anecdote about C.S. Lewis who was supposedly once asked at a conference on religions what was unique about Christianity, to which he apparently replied, "Oh that's easy. It's grace." But this isn't true. Several of the Indian traditions talk about grace – *anugraha* in Sanskrit. In fact, in one of the Vedāntic traditions called Viśiṣṭādvaita, there was a debate that paralleled the Calvinist-Arminian debate about the nature of human response to God's grace. They used the images of a mother cat picking up its kitten in its mouth to represent the 'grace alone' perspective, versus a monkey baby having to cling to its mother to represent the more cooperative view.

Some traditions strongly emphasise the love of God. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* even goes so far as saying that Kṛṣṇa, the name for God in that tradition, loves his devotees, his *bhaktas*, so much that he can almost be said to be under their control: "Śrī Bhagavān said: 'O *brāmaṇa*! I am under the control of my *bhaktas* – it is as if I have no independence. My heart has been captured by the saints (*sādhus*) and *bhaktas*, and I, in turn, am dear to the *bhakta* community". [1] I hear an echo here of Jesus' heartbreak over Jerusalem in Matthew 23:37: "'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" and in Jesus' willingness to lay down his life as described in John 10:11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

Aesthetics of Prayer and Worship

We should not confuse Western cultural forms of worship with the only 'right' way to worship. In culturally diverse societies, offering a variety of forms of devotion and worship, drawing from Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic traditions, can greatly enrich Christian communities, whether bhakti devotional singing in kirtans, prayerful mantra repetition, the deep meditation that so inspired Thomas Merton, or exquisite devotional poetry such as that of Kabir, Mirabai, or Rumi.

Separateness and Nonduality

Nonduality is the idea that while we are differentiated from God, we are not in fact wholly separate from God. There are strong threads of this in the New Testament – we are “in Christ”, the Holy Spirit dwells within us, and as Paul says in Acts 17:28 “in Him we live and move and have our being”. Interestingly, Paul here explicitly acknowledges that he is quoting a Greek poet, probably Epimenides – recognising a deep truth about our relationship with God spoken by ‘the stranger’, in this case a pagan poet. But on the whole, most Christians operate with a very dualistic view of God as being separate from us – and also, not coincidentally, that the creation is also separate from us. This view of separateness has led to a tragic misinterpretation of what it means for us to exercise ‘dominion’ over the Earth from Genesis 1:26. We imagine that we are somehow separate from the biosphere. As an economist in my earlier years, I remember being astonished when I first learned that most economic models take no account of the natural world. The fact that there is an entire sub-discipline, ‘ecological economics’ that tries to take the natural world seriously, speaks volumes about the dominant view of the discipline.

Love for Creation

I found it challenging to be confronted by traditions that showed a depth of love and care for the wellbeing of the creation – animals and the biosphere – that put anthropocentric interpretations of Christianity to shame. We may be permitted to eat animals, but nothing in scripture justifies the degree of cruelty involved in modern industrial agriculture, let alone so much of the church’s indifference to the impacts of climate change and species extinctions. I’ve come to understand that Christians greatly underestimate the moral stumbling block that meat-eating in general and factory farming in particular pose for many deeply spiritual non-Christians who are appalled by Christians’ indifference to animal suffering. In Revelation 11:18 we’re told that God will destroy those who destroy the Earth. How much does that warning affect our perceptions of what deserves our love and care? Here I will plug fellow participant Paul Fiddes’s book *Loving the Planet* – a wonderful example of an interfaith dialogue on these issues. [2]

Jesus the Galilean Rabbi as my Living Guru

From the Indian traditions I gained a deeper understanding of Jesus as a rabbi, or in Sanskrit a guru, and of Christianity, not as a set of beliefs but as a ‘way’, a ‘path’ to be walked. Remember, the first name for Christianity was ‘the Way’ (it appears in Acts 9:2 and several other places). Somewhere along the way, ‘the Way’ became for many a set of propositions *about* Jesus to believe – rather than a path to walk *following* Jesus. When I saw the extraordinary devotion of many Hindus and Buddhists to their gurus (or lamas in Tibetan), it made me reflect on my own devotion to Jesus. Learning *about* Jesus through Bible study, and worshiping Jesus in church are both hugely important. But worship can have an odd psychological affect on us that makes Jesus so utterly ‘other’, that it can stand in the way of us following the Way, the path of devotion that Jesus laid out in his teaching. The more I’ve thought of Jesus the Galilean rabbi as my living guru, the more I’ve felt drawn to deepen my devotion.

Work Without Ego Attachment

One of the most widely-known Hindu scriptures, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, has much to teach us as Christians. Literally translated 'The Song of the Lord', the *Gītā* is one section of vast multi-volume epic poem called the *Mahābhārata*. One of the core teachings of the *Gītā* is about non-attachment. In the story, Prince Ārjuna is reluctant to fight a great battle because some of his relatives are on the opposing side and he frets about the loss of life. God in the form of Kṛṣṇa (Krishna), his charioteer, tells him to do his duty, but to let go of the results – not in the sense of not caring, or of being negligent, but in the sense of doing his duty to the best of his ability, but not investing his ego in the outcome: "In action alone is your rightful-interest, never in [its] fruit. Let not your motive be the fruit of action ; nor let your attachment be to inaction." [3] There are several Bible passages that emphasise that our works of service are never ours and to the extent that we accomplish any good works, they are the result of God working through us. Paul says in Philippians 2:13, "it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure," and in 1 Corinthians 3:6-7, he reminds the faithful, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." The *Gītā* fills out this perspective, honing in on the tendency for us to invest our egos in our work and to become attached to the outcomes. I think a lot about that when considering my sense of call and my duty as a Christian. When I see signs proclaiming "John Smith International Ministries" or the like, I can't help feeling something has gone awry.

Perhaps even more deeply, the *Gītā's* perspective is that we should not even focus on rewards – rather we serve God purely for God's own sake, doing whatever is asked of us. But what then of the themes of 'reward' in the New Testament, such as Colossians 3:23-24: "Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward." Much Christian preaching and teaching has focussed on the lure of heaven and the threat of hell to motivate Christians. I think this transactional view is deeply unfortunate, and distorts the message of the gospel. Would we still serve Christ out of pure love, without any hope of reward? Is Jesus compelling enough to follow as a teacher, as a guru, regardless of what lies beyond the grave? I am not for a moment suggesting that Jesus is merely a human teacher. But I think some soul-searching is warranted for all of us who call ourselves Christian, to discern whether we follow Christ out of pure love or out of the hope of reward. And if it's the latter, perhaps there is something deeper to discover.

Doctrine is a Vehicle, Not the Destination

Teaching Early Buddhism has made me reflect on how we can become unhelpfully attached even to correct doctrine and to specific forms of liturgical practice. In the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, one of the scriptures of Theravādin Buddhism, the Buddha compares the *dhamma [4]*, his teaching, to a raft, emphasising, "So I have shown you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping. Bhikkhus [monks], when you know the Dhamma to be similar to a raft, you should abandon even the teachings, how much more so things contrary to the

teachings." [5] What is he saying here? The Buddha was not saying the teachings are unimportant – after all, he spent forty-five years teaching. He is saying rather, that the purpose of the teachings, of all of the sermons, doctrines and practices, is in order to get somewhere. Their purpose is to take us on a journey of liberation. If we become attached to the raft, strapping it to our backs as we press onward, we've missed the point. What might that imply for us as Christians? To me it implies that for us, the point of the Christian life is a journey with and in Christ, allowing ourselves to be transformed ever-more-deeply in love. The Eastern churches, both Orthodox and Catholic, call this process *theōsis* or divinisation. As St. Athanasius of Alexandria put it in *On the Incarnation*, "For he was incarnate that we might be made god." [6] In other words, the Christian life is a liberating journey of transformation into the Divine life. Bible study, sermons, doctrine – these are all vital. But they are the raft, and if we become attached to them, and overly-invested in them at the expense of a singular focus on the living God, we risk becoming the person hauling a raft through the forest, rather than walking in the gentle loving embrace of our Beloved.

These few reflections are a drop in the ocean of thoughts on loving the stranger – not from a position of material or spiritual superiority, but from a position of humility and curiosity. One of the ways in which we love strangers is by being curious about the work God has been doing among them for millennia.

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Endnotes

[1] BhP 9.4.63, Bryant, 2017, p. 454.

[2] Fiddes, 2022.

[3] BG 2.27, Feuerstein & Feuerstein, p. 207.

[4] *Dhamma* is the Pali spelling. Some readers will be more familiar with the Sanskrit spelling, *dharma*.

[5] Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, pp. 228-229.

[6] St. Athanasius, Chapter 54, p. 107.

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