The Pluralist Model
An Asian Appraisal

Edmund Chia

In this article Dr. Chia looks at the reality of religious pluralism in today’s world. He brings both his expertise and his many years of experience with interreligious dialogue to bear on his assessment of two models of addressing religious pluralism. Chia offers useful insights to ministers around the globe who need to deal with these realities in their local faith communities.

In spring 2006 the headline news highlighted the plight of a Muslim convert to Christianity who was about to be sentenced to death for apostasy. Some of his fellow Muslims, especially the radical and fundamentalist clerics, called for his head. On the other hand, the international community reacted, even by admonishing the government of his country to respect religious freedom. (By “international community” I refer mainly to those from the West, where the majority of the population is Christian.)

Prior to this incident there was yet another headline-making event, but that time it caught the attention of a much smaller section of the international community, confined particularly to those from the South. An archbishop of a major city with a predominantly Christian population had issued a condemnation of Krishna, one of the incarnations of God for the Hindu community. He went so far as to call Krishna an “evil demon, the personified power of hell opposing God.” He did this to encourage protest against a Krishna temple that was about to be built in his city.

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These are but two small examples of interreligious relations gone sour. Incidences of religious leaders condemning another religion and the reactive response of a threatened community are by no means atypical or unique. They are certainly not events that happen by chance. One could even say that they are frequent occurrences in the landscape of interreligious relations in much of Asia and around the world as well. This is the sad but true reality of the fact of religious pluralism in our times: religiously-minded people do not know what to do except to protect their own and, as part of the strategy to protect their own, also launch out in attacks upon the “other.”

The Challenge to Pluralists

On the other hand, people of different religions do interact with one another rather congenially on a day-to-day basis. In fact, most Asians will testify that they encounter and have healthy exchanges with more people of other religions than they have with their own coreligionists. This is the other fact of religious pluralism. However, it is also a reality that these interactions happen primarily in the social sphere, or at least they have almost nothing to do with religion. Unfortunately, when it comes to specifically religious matters there is great hesitation and trepidation about how to relate. It is not surprising, then, that in many countries religion is categorized as a “sensitive” issue and, therefore, not a subject of public discourse. There is an unwritten law that religious matters ought to be confined within the walls of one’s church, mosque, temple, or gurdwara. One gets a sense that religions are inherently incompatible and so should be kept isolated from one another. Religious pluralism (or the fact that there are many religions) is accepted as part of life, but a theology that appreciates such pluralism (or how we factor this pluralism into our understandings of God’s design of salvation) is seldom articulated. Put another way, while there is the natural “dialogue of life” taking place in society, the “dialogue of religions” does not come naturally.

To exacerbate the issue, where religion does creep out of one’s religious precincts it is often with the aim of encroaching on another’s. With the perception that religions are basically incompatible, other religions are therefore looked upon as nemeses or adversaries rather than as allies or partners. Religious commitment seems to entail that not only does one promote her/his own religion but also attempts to disparage or displace the religions of others. This can take a variety of forms, from turning a deaf ear when other religions are discriminated against, to participating in mission activities for the explicit conversion of “non-believers,” to working through governments in order to suppress the growth of another religion, to employing theological blackmail for the purpose of inducing the conversion of another to one’s own religion. The consequences of some of these actions cannot be overstated. Enough people have fallen victim to the conflicts and tension
caused by such insensitive and aggressive acts of religious violence and enough evil has been perpetuated by the instrumentalizing of religion for political and economic ends. Religion, instead of being the source of life and goodwill, has been used and abused often enough to bring about precisely the opposite.

It is against these “ground realities” that the pluralist model of the theology of religions has to be appraised. Why? Because in order for theology to be useful and relevant, it ought to be a source of personal and social transformation. Theology should have an impact on people’s lives. In this respect the pluralist model, which debunks the myth of the absoluteness and superiority of any one religion, has as its aims the promotion of tolerance, the eradication of arrogance, and the facilitation of harmonious interreligious relations. These were the explicit aims of a conference held in Birmingham in 2003, which brought together scholars who identify with the pluralist model. They were more than three dozen men and women and represented six of the major religious traditions. The culmination of the event takes the form of a recently published book by Paul Knitter, *The Myth of Religious Superiority*.

In any case, the two anecdotes above surely qualify as a *locus theologicus* for reflection on religious pluralism. Religious bigotry and intolerance are expressed everywhere, be it in the international, national, or inter-personal spheres. The pluralist model aims to lessen these occurrences. In questioning the myth of the uniqueness and finality of the various religions, pluralists aim to cut off the lifeline from which believers draw theological legitimation for their aggressive acts of evangelization and the subjugation of “non-believers.” As John Hick, one of the main proponents of the pluralist model, puts it: “These exclusive claims to absolute truth have exacerbated the division of the human community into rival groups, and have repeatedly been invoked in support of oppression, slavery, conquest, and exploration” (Knitter 2005, x).

In view of these ground realities, one wonders if indeed the pluralist model has been relevant or effective. While pluralists are not expected to solve all the problems of the world, they should at least have some sort of effect on the religious life of persons, especially the interreligious relations of those on the streets where religious pluralism is an existential reality. In raising this question about the influence and efficacy of the pluralist model, I appreciate that there are other “ground realities” that the pluralist theology of religions have to contend with, some of which I will discuss later.

**Appraising the Pluralist Model**

The first point to note is that the pluralist model is but a recent theological exploration (at least in its present explication). It arose primarily from the Christian world, specifically in the West, among Western theologians. This in part
has to do with the fact that it was only in the last half century that Western Christianity has been encountering the world of other religions in significant numbers, due to the increase in cross-cultural travel and migration, instantaneous communication, international education, etc. Information, literature, symbols, and people of other religions began to surface in the consciousness of Western Christians. Add that to the disillusionment they were already experiencing regarding their own Christian religion, especially after the two world wars, and you have the perfect recipe for a greater interest, if not openness, towards the religious “other.”

With this new consciousness, theologians exploring Christianity’s faith claims also had to take seriously the faith claims of their neighbors of other religions. While previously these other faith claims could be dismissed by Western Christians the same way the Western hegemonic powers dismissed the non-Western world as inferior and thus legitimizing their conquests and exploits, this can no longer be so in the new and globalized world. The facts were staring Western Christians in the face: people of other religions, they realize, are good, holy and probably saved, not so much despite their religions, but because of them. They have no need for Christianity, or the salvation that it purports to offer. Thus, the issue of Christianity’s relationship with other religions became a hot topic and the academic world saw a proliferation of works on the subject authored by Christian theologians over the next several decades (see Davis; Hick 1977; Hick 1980; Buhlmann; Smith; Anderson and Stransky; Camps; Costa; Cracknell; Swidler; Hick and Knitter).

Despite the significance of this exploration (or, could it be because of its significance?) the pluralist option remains but a small and soft voice in the arena of theological voices on the theology of religions. Its call that religions cross the “theological Rubicon” and give up claims to superiority, absoluteness, normativity, finality, and uniqueness is as attractive as it is threatening (see Hick and Knitter, viii; and Knitter 2005, vii). It is attractive in that it seems to augur well for an era where religions no longer need to expend energies on belittling or condemning one another. The conserved energies can then be focused on the more urgent and critical issues that religions ought to be addressing, namely the welfare of the people and other beings who are still alive on this earth. In short, the salvation of the eco-human community here and now. It is at the same time threatening in that it seems to be pulling the rug of uniqueness and absoluteness from under the feet of believers, features that are important to believers who look to religion as a source of solace, security, and identity (more on this later).
In view of what the crossing of the Rubicon entails, it comes as no surprise that the reception of the pluralist model is at best ambivalent. It remains at the margins, not often regarded as valid amongst those in the mainstream of their religious communities, and often also viewed with a certain degree of suspicion and cynicism. There is the perception that pluralism is incompatible with religious commitment, which means one has to choose between faithfulness to one’s Christian or religious identity and one’s allegiance to the principles of the pluralistic approach to other religions. This was the single most important challenge that the participants at the Birmingham conference sought to counter. In the words of Knitter: “Pluralists, in other words, feel they are faithful to their religious identities” (Knitter 2005, x).

That notwithstanding, the reality is that pluralist theologians have seldom been accepted or acknowledged by their own religious community. A simple look at the participants of the conference will confirm this (see Allen 2003). The Vatican’s Doctrinal Office had already officially censured one member of the group (see Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith). Several others have had unofficial but open conflict with the religious leadership of their communities, including receiving death threats and being subject to other such violence. John Hick and Paul Knitter themselves have also encountered a host of problems with the members of their own congregations. The pluralist model, therefore, has the problem of credibility as its proponents remain mainly on the fringes of their religious communities. This in turn severely hampers its efficacy, as it is not even given a hearing for lack of a constituency.

The Challenge of the Exclusivists

To compound the problem, the pluralist voice has to compete with the much stronger and louder exclusivist voice. The latter has the advantage of the weight of centuries of tradition behind it. It is, therefore, able to present itself as the orthodox version of the religious tradition and even often serves as guardian for its true interpretation. While exclusivists are probably also not representative of the population of believers in Asia and elsewhere, it is significant to note the high profile nature of their efforts and their increasing success at converting not only people to their own religion but also fellow-religionists to their own version of theology. Against the pluralist model, exclusivism sets forth an absolutist version of religion such that one is left without any doubt about the authenticity and superiority of one’s own religion. It provides black-and-white, clear-cut answers to the problems of the world, and points to the necessity of faith (their version of it, of course) for the salvation of souls. The uniqueness of such a faith is emphasized, as is its universality. Such teachings are attractive as they offer some form of
certainty in a world full of uncertainties, especially in today’s world, characterized more and more by change, threat, disintegration and chaos.

The frightening aspect to this is that proponents of the exclusivist model have been rather successful in presenting their theses, be it by intellectually convincing or by strategically indoctrinating their followers. Their teachings are normally well-packaged and attract a great following. I am thinking here of how the video series by a Franciscan University of Steubenville theologian has made the rounds in much of Asia and its brand of theology has been received as if it was “Gospel Truth.” Many of the exclusivists’ followers often end up not only as zealous defenders of the faith and religion, but also as daring warriors who go out of their way to disparage other religions. I am reminded of an Asian “Shine Jesus Shine” team that makes it a point to “exorcize” entire neighborhoods and the environment from the influence of other religions whenever they hold their rallies in order to claim the territories exclusively for Christ.

Enthusiasm never seems to be lacking for the exclusivist version of the faith. We know that there are those who are more than willing to die for their faith; we are also made more and more aware that there are those who are more than willing to kill in its name. Another frightening phenomenon is that many very young men and women of today are enthusiastically embracing the exclusivist position. Elsewhere I have referred to them as the JP2 generation (see Chia). The current literature points to this, as does my personal observation, that many college youth in Asia are turning towards the more conservative and fundamentalist oriented strands of Christianity (the presumption here is that there is a high correlation between conservatism, fundamentalism, and the exclusivistic option). This has a bearing on the nature of the future of religion if indeed many of the younger generation are tending towards exclusivism.

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The In-Betweens

While the exclusivists may have a significant following as compared to the pluralists, it is also important to acknowledge that the majority of believers are neither exclusivists nor pluralists. At best they are indifferent, with commitment neither to one thesis nor the other. These are the silent ones, the “in-betweens,” those who have no position and contribute little to the debate on the theology of
religions. This silent majority most appropriately represents the mainstream. For them, religion is but a Sunday morning affair, after which all that they hope for is a good life, one that is lived harmoniously and in good neighborly relationships with all persons, irrespective of faith and religious affiliation. While generally not passionate about their own faith claims, they are also not adverse to the faith claims of their neighbors of other religions. Their primary concern is for all peoples to get along and live peacefully, with religion not playing a hindering or a facilitating role. They have no interest in converting others to their religion, neither are they interested in converting to another. As centrists who are neither left nor right leaning, they are at the same time the most open and vulnerable to being “converted,” either by the exclusivists or the pluralists. This silent majority are probably the most plausible constituents for the pluralists, provided they are approached with care.

I say “with care” because believers in this category are more often than not at a very basic level as far as their religious and faith life is concerned. Their faith is simple (not to be equated with simplistic), just as their thinking on theological matters is simple and uncomplicated. Religion is basically an institution that serves to provide a certain sense of meaning, identity, and source of security. In terms of James Fowler’s theory of the stages of faith development (which Leonard Swidler has used to identify requisites for interreligious dialogue), many of these “in-betweens” are probably at stage 3 faith, the “Synthetic-Conventional” stage (see Fowler; also see Swidler 1990). At this stage the sense of belonging and of faithfulness to the valued group’s values and ideologies take prime importance. Believers at this stage adopt whatever positions are considered the most conventional and approved by the group, the institution, and the religion. Where the conservative strand has a stronger voice, most of these “in-betweens” will endorse conservatism. Where liberal voices dominate, this silent majority will tend toward the liberal tradition. The theological orientation is often not as important as one’s allegiance to and acceptance by the religious community.

Significance of the Silent Majority

Progress to Fowler’s stage 4 “Individuative Reflective” faith happens when perspectives are broadened. This might entail what is called the “leaving home” experience. Just as the experience of leaving home spurs an adolescent to develop into individuated adulthood, a person’s faith life can also be spurred along with exposure to faiths outside of one’s own tradition. This, unfortunately, is not an experience many are encouraged to acquire, at least not in the churches in Asia. If anything, institutional religions are in the main parochial and do little to help their members understand, let alone appreciate, other religions. A priest friend of
mine put it well, and very honestly at that: “We are already having so much trouble nurturing the Christian faith of our parishioners. How can we even talk about interreligious dialogue? Furthermore, we are afraid that if they are exposed to other religions they might take an interest in them and stop coming to church. Our collection boxes depend on Sunday church attendance.”

Without such exposure, it is difficult (though not impossible) for persons to arrive at stage 4 faith. This in turn makes it difficult for the self-critical and self-reflective stance that is so necessary for one to develop an openness to other religions. The ability to deconstruct and demythologize faith claims is facilitated when persons engage in this self-reflective process, guided by a broadened perspective-taking. For a person who has not entered this individuative-reflective stage to read John Hick’s *Myth of God Incarnate* would be precisely what I was referring to when I spoke about pulling the rug from under the believer’s feet.

Moreover, as Swidler also points out, only when persons have reached the stage 5 “Conjunctive Faith” are they adequately disposed for interreligious dialogue. This is the stage where persons are comfortable with mutuality and a sense of relativity, including the relativity of their absolute faith claims. It is therefore at this stage where they are more likely to feel secure about embracing the pluralist model of the theology of religions. But, as Fowler points out, only a very small percentage of the population ever acquire stage 5 faith. Most are fixed at stage 3, the stage most conducive for the maintenance and sustenance of institutions, including religion, and for the preservation of the status quo, since loyalty is a virtue that matters most to stage 3ers. Stage 4ers and stage 5ers are usually unwelcome within institutions, for they are the ones who raise questions about the very institution from which they developed. They are the critics and the rebels who end up either as reformers or dropouts. Resistance to their reform agendas or renewed interpretations of the religious tradition is to be expected, especially from the incumbent power-holders of the institutions they question. Stage 4ers and stage 5ers are very often marginalized even before they can effect any form of change or garner any form of support. The pluralist model, characteristic of stage 5 faith, can expect to have few fans and followers. Many of those who embrace it are probably already outside of their institutional tradition anyway. The pluralist model will probably always remain at the margins, on the threshold, at the edges.

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Challenge for Pluralists

While acknowledging this fate, the challenge is for pluralists to find new and creative means of reincarnating the pluralist option so that those in the mainstream, the “in-betweens,” can at least give it a hearing and appreciate its thesis. Perhaps there is a need for a return to the Rubicon, to examine the aspects of the pluralist model that are most threatening and unacceptable for the mainstream majority, given the level of their faith development. Many of these aspects are nondoctrinal in nature and need to be addressed not only by theology or philosophy but also by sociology, psychology, economics, etc. There is also the need to explore the efficacy of the transmission of pluralist ideals. The path of religious education is one avenue to consider.

In short, the pluralist model has much to offer not only for the “salvation” of the theology of religions but also for the practical day-to-day living of religious people. Its thesis can help alleviate the suffering and tension caused by religious bigotry and doctrinal intolerance. However, even today, its reception does not befit its significance. Just as the hermeneutics of praxis is employed in the development of the theology of religions, the present state of its reception ought to prompt pluralists to return to the praxis to examine where the problem is and how it can be best addressed. This is the challenge for pluralists if they want the pluralist model to be effective and relevant.

References

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