

THE WISDOM OF LEARNING INTERRELIGIOUSLY AFTER *FIDES ET RATIO*

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I welcome this opportunity to reflect on the construction of new culture-specific (or “local”) theologies in light of the insights and invitation of John Paul II in *Fides et Ratio*. I was particularly happy to recall for this purpose how he highlighted India as a particularly important site for Christianity’s new learning from an ancient and great culture of Asia.¹

My first visit to South Asia was in 1973, when I arrived at St. Xavier’s High School in Kathmandu to teach the whole range of secondary school boys (almost all Hindu and Buddhist) as part of my Jesuit formation. In the two years that I was there, I taught a range of subjects, including English grammar, speech, and literature, and what

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¹Too much can be made of this point, of course, since we are hardly at the beginning of the encounter between Hinduism and Christianity, with the last 500 years of intensive Western Christian presence in India and more than a 1000 years of Christian presence in India before that.

then was called “moral science.” Finding it dull (for the students and for myself) to simply rehearse principles of morality in an abstract manner, I started introducing stories and lessons from Hindu and Buddhist scriptures and popular literature into class, to illustrate the same moral principles but from a new perspective. As I discussed such stories and related matters with my students, I was confirmed in my original intuition that spending time in Asia would open my eyes to new philosophical and theological insights and ways of thinking, and in turn help me to think through my own Christian faith, with its theological contexts, in fresh and rejuvenated ways.²

Since that first visit, I have studied Hinduism with some intensity over more than three decades. I know by experience that encounter – personal, cultural, intellectual and spiritual – across religious boundaries, and the Christian-Hindu border in particular, does indeed enrich Christian faith in innumerable small ways.³ I have benefited from many conversations over the decades with many a Hindu religious intellectual, in traditional and modern sites of learning, and also with many Indian Christian theologians and spiritual writers. These have amply shown how Christian theology has and does come alive in the Indian context, in ways that are not simply (re)applications of learning already achieved, articulated and taught in the West. Given my experience, I can readily assent to the idea that of course there are important Christian theological conversations flourishing in Asia, Christian theologies that, though rooted in the long Christian tradition and in centuries of Asian intellectual inquiry, are attuned to today’s burning issues.⁴

I can confirm the importance of this development by making several additional observations. My study of Indian thought, including Indian Christian thought, has helped me to see that my own work, however dependent it is on India, does not add up to an Asian or Indian theology; study is contextual, not a matter of learning by itself. Being there matters, and no amount of study of Hinduism, for instance, adds up to an Indian theology. Nor do I study Hinduism for

²On my early experiences in India and Nepal, see “In Ten Thousand Places, In Every Blade of Grass: Uneventful but True Confessions about Finding God in India, and Here Too,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 28.3 (May 1996), and also Chapter 1 of my recent *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

³See for instance the examples I give in *Comparative Theology*, particularly chapters 6-8.

⁴I must add that from my many conversations with Hindus in India and in the West I also know that while Hindus have learned much from the West, even today many have reservations about the motivations underlying Christian interest in Hinduism.

the same reasons, by the same methods, as do most Indian Christians who take an interest in the Hindu intellectual traditions. Rather, my writing takes its form as an inculturated theology appropriate to my North American context, specifically in the context of academic institutions, Catholic and private, in the US Northeast. I am not an Asian theologian, and my study of and representation of Hinduism is not primarily for Hindus and Christians in India, even if I welcome conversations on my work with Indians. Rather, I write for North Americans, and primarily for Catholic Christians in the US context.⁵ There would be little point in expecting Christians in India and Christians in America to study Hinduism in exactly the same way in each place. The needs of our cultures differ, the politics of interreligious learning differ, although the United States is as religiously diverse as India. Even how we explain the same texts – a Gospel, the Bhagavad Gita, etc. – rightly varies from culture to culture.

Indeed: no Christian theology today can be privileged simply as “theology,” and no Christian theology should be marked “local,” as if relevant only to that culture. All true Christian theologies are local, and all matter to the universal Church. Yes, of course, there are core doctrines of the faith and the Creeds that apply everywhere, and yes, the Vatican and the bishops have the responsibility to seek to make sure that those core teachings are taken into account everywhere in the world. And yes, not all theological writing is of great value or global significance; some is simply addressed to a local situation and relevant for a time, and some is best forgotten locally and globally. But when anyone, in any part of the world, starts to explain the faith and articulate its relevance, that action is the expression of a context-specific theology, and any of those context-specific theologies have the potential to be of universal significance. I mention this to rule out the simple but prevalent idea that when Asians do theology, it is *Asian* that matters most, while when Europeans and North Americans do theology it is *theology* that matters. In all cases, it is both the locale – be it Leuven or New York or Delhi – and the theologizing that matter.

Thus it is clear to me, given my travels back and forth between Boston/Cambridge and India (primarily Chennai) over the decades, that North American theological reflection and Indian theological reflection can both be grounded in scripture and tradition, both

⁵I am also aware that an “Indian” or “South Asian” Christian theology need not be focused on Hinduism, given the other rich religious traditions that flourish and have flourished there. But for the sake of this brief essay, I limit my reflection to the possibility of learning from Hindu traditions, in India or the wider world.

composed within the community of the Church, and yet too both sensitive to the social and cultural, economic and political needs of their particular concrete contexts – and therefore inevitably turning out rather differently. It is not that North American theology is somehow context-free or abstract, nor that Indian theology is context-bounded or “with the people” in some way unimagined in North America. It is simply that these theologies, Indian and American, differ because their contexts differ. They have much to teach one another even with regard to the specific tensions between faith and reason such as are explored in the encyclical.

Fides et Ratio was of course not dedicated to the issue of the cultivation of theological reflection in the various cultures of the world, but n. 72 of the encyclical offered some useful clarifications about what is at stake when we welcome new theologies. First, John Paul pointed to a distinct kind of learning, whereby Asian and then Indian intellectual traditions offer distinctive teachings:

Our thoughts turn immediately to the lands in the east, so rich in religious and philosophical traditions of great antiquity. Among these lands, India has a special place. A great spiritual impulse impels the Indian mind to seek that experience which, when the mind is freed of the shackles of time and space, attains the highest good. In the process of this quest for liberation notable metaphysical schools were established.⁶

More can be said regarding the many religious traditions of India which, among many other things, also offer more positive theologies of interaction with deities, and find ways of affirming life in this world, and of course see themselves as more than searching in accord with spiritual impulses, but rather also receiving divine initiatives.

The Pope’s appeal for cross-cultural learning portrayed that learning as intrinsic to Christian mission and doctrine. This perspective gets at the heart of our sense of ourselves as Christians; such learning is not an afterthought or side matter, but something that occurs precisely in the course of living out Christian mission:

Although the mission to evangelize in its course encountered Greek philosophy first, this by no means indicates that other encounters are precluded. Today, as the Gospel gradually comes into contact with cultural worlds which Christian doctrine did not previously access, new works of inculturation arise. Questions such as the Church had to face in its first period are now carried forward among people today.

⁶I have adapted the standard available translation in several places. Except where noted, quotations are from n. 72.

What good is this new learning? The Pope appealed to the image of richness, flourishing: "In this time, it is the duty of Christians, and particularly Indian Christians, to draw from this rich patrimony those elements which are able to be conjoined with their faith, that Christian doctrine become richer." This increase in the richness of Christian doctrine is not by changes in truth; neither is it a matter merely of new cultural furnishings, decorations for the Gospel. Rather, the doctrine itself acquires a new, local richness that is not merely external to that doctrine. Interreligious encounters are not appendices to the work of preaching the Gospel; mission is an occasion for contact with other cultural worlds, while doctrine experiences the changes arising in encounter; new work must be done to articulate the mission and the doctrine in its new contexts.

And what do we do with what we learn? This is another, basic question on which the Pope offered advice, by also offering three rules by which to insure that the multiplicity of theologies are allowed to arise and be taken seriously, without fragmenting Catholic tradition. We can read these rules not only as warnings against misunderstandings or excess in the development of local theologies, but also guides for making what is learned permanent, truly enriching, and of benefit to the whole Church.

First, there is a shared human nature that is not cancelled out by particularity, "a universality of the human spirit, whose basic needs are shown to be the same in the most disparate cultures." We all share basic needs. All of us have to figure out how to deal with our humanity and mortality. That we can assume some common ground makes study possible. Were there no universal human nature, we could not learn from one another; what happens to be learned might be confused with immediately sympathies or simply constructed patterns dependent on historical encounters; Christians elsewhere might simply dismiss what is learned in India or Africa, for instance, as "having to do with them not us." We are not all Indians or Africans, but in accord with the universality of the human spirit and the basic human problems we all share, there is no Christian who cannot learn from Christian thought in India or Africa.

Second, if inculturation is possible and necessary, the new learning and its deep appropriation is not something to be put on and taken off, as if an incidental convenience by which to make contact. Indeed, what is achieved in light of earlier encounters is not to be pushed aside by later ones: "In engaging great cultures which it had not previously been in contact with, what she learned through her inculturation in Greco-Latin learning cannot be left behind." Older moments of inculturation cannot be forgotten or put aside. Now it is

true that some moments of inculturation, such as the early encounter with Greek thought, not only became basic to all subsequent Christian thought, but also tended to be taken as so important as to suffocate other encounters ancient and modern. But even so, there would be no value in dismissing great intellectual encounters, as with the Greek world, that have helped the Church to be Church.

Nor can those encounters minimize the importance of other encounters, particularly those that have occurred far from Rome. The Pope emphasized that the Church of the future is a Church that will continue to be enriched by new learning from Asia, such as should not be neglected or forgotten by the universal Church: "the Church of every age, even ages to come... will experience herself enriched by today's access to Eastern cultures and will find in this inheritance fresh cues by which [still further] dialogue can be fruitfully instituted with those cultures..."

Third, care must be taken, "lest a legitimate exposition of the proper nature and singularity of Indian philosophy be confused with the view that a cultural tradition ought to be secured within its distinctiveness, so that [its singularity] emerges [only] by way of disagreement with other traditions. This would be contrary to the nature of the human spirit." This difficult passage seems to indicate that even if we agree that cultures are unique and not to be pushed to the side as if nothing is to be learned from them, it is still the case that there is danger in the other extreme, imagining cultures to be entirely closed worlds that have nothing to learn and no reason to change in dialogue with the world Church. Even after a culture's rich history is appreciated and deeply explored, that too is not the end of the story. Neither Greek nor Irish nor Indian Christianity becomes a culture so precious and beautiful that it cannot be enriched by other, new encounters beyond their boundaries.

We are left then with the prospect of multiple theologies, all of them intertwined with a common Christian heritage but none of them the sole privileged expression of that history for today. Once we admit that the mission and doctrine of the Christian faith is always adjusting to new contexts in new encounters that both imitate older moment of openness but now in new ways, we can add that the theologies are learning experiences for one another. Here too, the same three rules are useful.

First, we need to recognize the various localized Christian theologies as having something in common with our own, and with the theologies developed in other traditions too, because our work of faith seeking understanding is grounded in universal possibilities.

Second, we need to share the particular histories that make up Christian theology: and no longer just the Greek-encounter, but also in particular the various histories that we share, the coming of the various forms of Christianity to Asia, and now too the ways in which Asian cultures are creating new epochs in the history of the Church.

Third, we need to remain open. None of our specific local theologies, old or new, becomes a world unto itself, as if once established, it would remain forever unchanged. Rather, the various Christian theologies flourishing in the various parts of the world all have a shared future history, learning from and challenging one another. Neither the Greek example nor the Indian example could be the end of the story of Christian learning. But, as was the Greek encounter in its time, the new Indian story of interreligious learning needs to be taken to heart by the universal Church, lest we prematurely think of moving beyond it before listening to it has taken place.

I close with a kind of afterword to the preceding reflections. The Pope's teaching was a prolonged meditation on faith and reason, and the dynamic interaction of faith and reason as he saw it fruitfully shows the way for new theologies and new learning in the global Church. But it is also true that the prospects for achieving, deepening, and fruitfully learning across religious boundaries and from new Christian theologies depend also on other virtues. Here I will suggest four.

First, we need humility in the face of history. Learning across religious boundaries and constructing new, local theologies requires that we acknowledge histories that are mixed and difficult, not just attending to moments that are positive and fruitful. As mentioned above, we are by no means in some new situation when we think of Christianity encountering Indian culture, and must consider why it is that inculturation is in some ways such a delicate matter, often perceived as a political strategy that once again interferes with Hindu cultural and religious values. Some encounters of Christians with Hindus have been obtrusive and destructive, negative activity promoted for the sake of mission and in the name of the Gospel. We cannot look forward to new moments of inculturation without admitting that there have been many past encounters, and that all of them have been flawed, and some of them even sinful.

Second, and consequently, *current* politics must be taken seriously. Numerous factors give added significance to the fact that there are theologies specific to Africa, Asia, India and the various parts of India. As long as theology is perceived of as the import of a foreign Church, couched in a language that makes sense only elsewhere, then

mission and doctrine will be weaker than they should, seeming rather to be exercises in a neo-colonial effort to explain cultures and instruct the people of those cultures to think like people who are far away, often living in conditions of power, comfort, and safety – and thus quite removed from what is locally possible or desirable. The assertion of new, local theologies is not only indicative of a fact – this theology, as a Christian theology, has grown up here, in this local situation – but also an indication that the Christians engaged in this work are themselves local, not visitors whose wisdom has been come from elsewhere. So too, even within various religious communities, the political dimension can hardly be ignored, for neither faith nor reason is entirely innocent of political factors. Numerous difficult questions immediately come to the fore: whose theology? whose voices are heard? who gets to decide which theology is authoritative? what are the social ramifications of any given theological position? And here too, where the theologian is working matters, since it would not be helpful to conflate Dalit concerns voiced in India with African American concerns voiced in the United States, or to imagine that either Indian women or American women have *the* correct, most trenchant critiques of patriarchy. Nor need the inevitable tension, often healthy but sometimes most unfortunate, between Vatican doctrinal positions and local instances of inculturated theologies have to take the same form in New York and Delhi, or Cambridge and Chennai.

The Pope is right to say that cultures ought not close in on themselves, using their distinct character as a shield against new ideas or input from the wider human community and, in our case, the Catholic Church as a global entity. But some walls, not meant merely to exclude, serve the necessary and good purpose of protecting what is new against established and dominant systems that have been prone to swallow up the new for the sake of preserving the old. Similarly, the politics of religious identity in America today make a cultural eclecticism easy, but a deeper appropriation of a new religious wisdom far more difficult.

Third, we need to be clear that faith and reason will thrive if there really is a desire to learn. In themselves, faith and reason do not exclude empathy, falling in love with what one learns, and being changed by it; but it is still good to emphasize that inculturation's deeper roots depend on imaginative and affective dimensions that entails risks that are at times stifled by the prudence of reason and the proprieties of faith. What faith sees as possible and reason carefully investigates and gives expression to, needs also to come alive and remain alive, touching hearts as well as minds, enabling the person

learning to step beyond overly cautious, timid boundaries. John Paul nicely captured this in an earlier passage in the encyclical. He reminded us that in the context of his own construction of faith in relation to reason, St. Anselm explored a relationship between inquiry and a love of learning, a dynamic that is also a matter of desire:

Saint Anselm underscores the fact that the intellect must seek that which it loves: the more it loves, the more it desires to know. Whoever lives for the truth is reaching for a form of knowledge which is fired more and more with love for what it knows, while having to admit that it has not yet attained what it desires: "To see you was I conceived; and I have yet to conceive that for which I was conceived." The desire for truth, therefore, spurs reason always to go further; indeed, it is as if reason were overwhelmed to see that it can always go beyond what it has already achieved. (n. 43)

This dynamic of desire necessarily involves risk. In going beyond what one already knows, toward what is not already possessed – and therefore not already understood – we are faced with the construction of new, particular theologies in new cultural and religious encounters. These are in part a manner of invention, engagement in the uncertain and new. Such constructive theological reflection is ideally led by the instinct that there is more to be learned from these particular religious words, images, acts, in this cultural context, and that what is learned will surely later on become a source of richness for the faith, for mission, and for doctrine, even if now desire runs ahead of any assurances. The desire for truth may therefore lead the theologian onto uncertain ground where she or he voices concerns that make more conventional theologians uneasy. In the desire for truth, for instance, we may find ourselves, for reasons grounded in faith, crossing the borders between our own tradition and another, and in a situation where how we believe and how we reason about our faith change due to what we have learned interreligiously. We may seem to have gone too far, by those whose desire for truth has never pushed them very far at all.

Fourth, the new interreligious and intercultural encounters are also a matter of spiritual practice. Earlier in the encyclical, John Paul called to the attention of theologians the words of St. Bonaventure on the virtues of the Christian and the theologian, virtues that I suggest will have special force in fostering new cultural and religious encounters:

Let theologians always remember the words of that great master of thought and spirituality, Saint Bonaventure, who in introducing his *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* invites the reader to recognize the

inadequacy of “reading without repentance, knowledge without devotion, research without the impulse of wonder, prudence without the ability to surrender to joy, action divorced from religion, learning sundered from love, intelligence without humility, study unsustained by divine grace, thought without the wisdom inspired by God.” (n. 105)

If the virtues Bonaventure mentions are brought to bear in each and every place where the Church exists, then the new cultural encounters will be genuinely spiritual, and therefore more likely to lead to new insights that serve the whole Church, and then also to an openness on the part of that whole Church to hear and take to heart what happens to have been learned far from Rome and the academies of Western learning.

But all of this is preliminary to the work of actually learning interreligiously. Theologians need to learn across religious and cultural borders, seeking in faith, guided by the tough principles and questions of reason, and given energy by the desires of a loving heart. If our composition of new theologies – in India, in Rome, in New York – is to be a work in keeping with Christian mission and carried out for the sake of purifying and deepening our grasp of Christian doctrine, then we must do the work of serious study, risking ourselves in the encounters that define our 21st century.