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**“My hand over my mouth... I have nothing
more to say.”**

Letting Allah Breakthrough Our Dogmatic Certainties

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Abstract

This is a personal reflection by a Christian on The Book of Job/ Ayyub from the Hebrew Bible. Religious dogmatism confines adherents within their tradition over against adherents of other religious traditions. Such a stance is not able to respond to the great improbables of life such as the suffering of the innocent. It can also lead to communal conflict and to the impoverishment of faith by imaging God in superficial anthropomorphic terms. Only through facing the tempest within ourselves, and in the surrounding society, will we encounter Allah the All Merciful, the All Compassionate, who moves us beyond dogmatic certainties and religious partisanship. Such was the journey of Job/ Ayyub: a journey from certainty to faith. With such a purifying journey we can embrace religious pluralism not as compromise but rather as an occasion for mutual conversion and mutual enrichment.

The Ayyub of the Hebrew Scriptures:

I am a Christian from the Catholic tradition. I would like to make a personal reflection on a Book from the Hebrew Bible which has been incorporated into the Christian Bible in the section commonly known as the Old Testament. The volume in question is the Book of Job/

Ayyub. Job/ Ayyub has absolutely everything (Ch.1:1-3). He has seven adult sons and three daughters. He owns seven thousand sheep and three thousand camels, five hundred cattle and another five hundred donkeys, not counting innumerable servants, thus making him “the richest person in the East” (Ch.1:3). But Ayyub is not just phenomenally rich; he is also described as pious and honest (a rather uncommon combination!). Ayyub is the one to whom everyone comes to consult and seek advice.

But then God and Satan have a wager (Ch.1:6-12; 2:1-6), God allows Satan to strip Ayyub of everything: his riches, his children, his health. Covered in sores, Ayyub is left squatting on a dung heap far from human habitation. Only his wife remains and she taunts her husband: “Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!” (Ch.2:9). Ayyub laments his fate not understanding what has happened (Ch.3:1-26). Then three “friends” appear and for 27 long chapters in three cycles of discourses (Ch. 4-31) they try to convince Ayyub to seek God’s mercy. Eliphaz of Teman is elderly with much experience of life. Calmly, politely, yet without the slightest doubt or hesitation, he encourages Ayyub to acknowledge his sins and repent, for the just are rewarded with blessing, the sinner with curse. But Ayyub is not aware of any major fault that needs confessing (Ch.6:1-7:21). Eliphaz is followed by Bildad of Shuah, a hard-hitting, emotional young man. He knows God’s will with the certainty of a religious expert, and judges Ayyub harshly. But Ayyub remains bewildered, unaware of his supposedly grave sins (Ch.9:1-10:22). And so to the third “friend” - or precisely “sparring partner” - Zophar of Naamath challenges Ayyub. Three cycles of three “friends”, eight discourses in all.¹ And they get nowhere.² The point is, not only are the three “friends” locked in a dogmatic concept that decides that personal suffering is due to personal sin, so is Ayyub locked into the same teaching. They could well continue for another dozen cycles of discourse and still get nowhere. A key dogmatic conviction in the institutional religion of the time - not so different from the common conviction of many today - simply does not square with experience. Ayyub, like so many innocent people today, do suffer and they do not see how that suffering can be due to grave personal sin. As long as they are locked in dogmatic conviction about the logical cause-and-effect of sin and suffering, and just as importantly, as long as they remain

1 The three Eliphaz discourses are found in Ch.4:1-5:27; 15:1-35; and 22:1-30; those of Bildad in Ch. 8:1-22; 18:1-21; and 25:1-6, and the two discourses of Zophar in Ch.11:1-20 and 20:1-29.

2 A fourth “friend” makes an appearance namely, Elihu, a Buzite of the clan of Ram (Ch.32:1-37:25). This is a later addition to the book, his message: suffering purifies, bringing about awareness that leads to blessing.

limited by their narrow concept of God, there is no way forward. Any extremist or fundamentalist would feel at home in the logic of these prolonged discourses.

But how does Ayyub respond to his three “friends” or sparring partners.³ Uncomprehending, their advice pains him: “If only my anguish could be weighed and all my misery be placed on the scales! It would surely outweigh the sand of the seas - no wonder my words have been impetuous” (Ch.6:1-3). Their advice intensifies the tempest within Ayyub who justifies his defiance: “I will not keep silent; I will speak out in the anguish of my spirit, I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.” (Ch.7:11). The problem is, Ayyub is himself locked into the same tormenting frame as his judgemental “friends”. He suffers from the same clear-cut, opinionated religion, and believes in the same harsh, unyielding God. Exasperated, Ayyub sees no way forward except – if it were possible - to take God to court:

God is not a mere mortal like me that I might answer him, that we might confront each other in court. If only there were someone to mediate between us, someone to bring us together, someone to remove God’s rod from me, so that God’s terror would frighten me no more. Then I would speak up without fear, but as it now stands with me, I cannot. (Ch.9:32-35)

The prolonged discourses reach an impasse.

Discourses of Allah from the Heart of the Tempest:

The breakthrough will come when God has been released from the harsh confines of narrow human dogma, and divine insight is allowed to breakdown judgemental religious logic. This involves a letting go, a surrender, of any and all encapsulating images of God, and an acknowledgement of the vital yet provisional role of faith-statements. Only when Ayyub has been stripped not only of his family and friends, of his wealth and position, but also of his judgemental religion and false image of God, only when he collapses in impotence, does he hear a Voice coming from the heart of his tempest-torn life. Only then is the God of the institutional religion of his time is displaced by the voice of Allah (Ch.38:1-39:33 and 40:1-41:25).⁴ In magnificent poetry, Allah challenges Ayyub: “Where were you...”

3 Ayyub’s initial lament is found in Ch.3:1-26. His seven responses to Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, which get progressively longer and more plaintive, are found in Ch.6:1-7:21; 9:1-10:22; 12:1-14:22; 16:1-17:16; 19:1-21:34; 23:1-25; 26:1-31:40.

4 Throughout the long discourses God is called El or Elohim [The Almighty], only in the tempest is God referred to as YHWH [the Lord of the Sinai covenant]. Likewise, I refer to the divinity of the discourses (institutional religion) as “God”, only referring to the God of the tempest as Allah.

The successful, honest and pious Ayyub thought he knew God. And yet, after weeks, if not months of wrestling with God, he was still locked into the God of his institutional religion. Surprisingly, or on further reflection not surprisingly, in two long discourses Allah does not respond directly to the questions the tormented Ayyub has raised. Allah gives no answer to the key issue of the suffering of the innocent, neither does Allah retort to Ayyub's challenge to bring God to court. In profoundly beautiful poetry, Allah breaks through the puny logic of humanly-constructed religion, by displaying the power of the Godhead in creation. Only after he was reduced to impotence, worn out by his own pain of non-seeing, non-understanding, non-accepting; only after hearing the voice from the tempest within - "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" (Ch.38:4) - does Ayyub finally surrender:

My words have been frivolous: what can I reply? I had better lay my hand over my mouth. I have spoken once, I shall not speak again; I have spoken twice, I have nothing more to say. (Ch.40:3-5)

Both truth and dialogue are grounded in humility and meekness, rather than in human logic. The closer we are to that, the closer we are to Truth. Ayyub, and we too, have to unlock the encapsulating religious system into which we tend to enclose ourselves. Finally Ayyub confesses, not to sin but to ignorance; his fault was to depend upon certainty rather than be open to a faith that risks all:

I know that you are all-powerful: what you conceive, you can perform. I was the one who misrepresented your intentions with my ignorant words. You have told me about great works that I cannot understand, about marvels which are beyond me, of which I know nothing. Before, I knew you only by hearsay, but now, having seen you with my own eyes, I retract what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes. (Ch.42:1-6)

Reading Ayyub's surrender to the all-powerful, all-merciful Allah, I recall a scene that you all know so well. I was in Jakarta one year in the 1970s as Ramadhan closed/climaxed with the celebration of Idul Fithri. The city was quiet as millions of its citizens had returned to their ancestral homes to celebrate. But many remained and I witnessed hundreds if not thousands of believers take part in Salat Id. Mosques were overflowing, worshipers filling the nearby streets. They willingly collapsed, like Ayyub, before Allah, in postures of praise, of adoration,

of wonder, of joy, of beauty, of open surrender.⁵ Let us take a look, then, of the spirituality of faith-filled persons who are able to let go of any and every restrictive religious frame and surrender to Allah who is beyond any human language.⁶

A Spirituality of Presence:

Ayyub was not able to see Allah with his own eyes while he was busy running a highly successful business and heading a large, extremely demanding household. Like the prophet Musa (Exodus 33-34) he first had to go “outside the camp”.⁷ We meet Allah “outside the camp”, outside the institution, outside culturally conditioned beliefs and perceptions. It is “outside the camp” that Allah, who cannot be controlled, reveals Self as a “merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness, who imparts kindness for a thousand generations” (Exodus 34:6-7). Ayyub, too, discovered that “outside the camp” we meet the “Other” who is different, and only then do we discover who we truly are.

As we know well today in our consumerist culture, constant activity and excitement empties the heart, leading us to a haunted lonesomeness. But Ayyub was not such a rootless nomad wandering from excitement to excitement, sensation to sensation unable to settle anywhere for too long. Neither was he chasing after ephemeral images, exhausted, fumbling on without a foothold. He was grappling with key issues in his faith tradition that no longer spoke to his situation. He tackled a theology that insisted that his suffering was due to his sinfulness, a teaching he found mean and controlling, a teaching that needed to be unravelled. Finally Allah revealed Self in the tempest of his life, reducing Ayyub to utter stillness, at long last his eyes and heart open, a silent –

5 If I am not mistaken, apart from being named in lists of prophets (6:83-7; 4:165), there are just two references to Ayyub in the Qur’an (21:83-4 and 38:41-44). The picture here seems to coincide with that at the end of the Book of Job in the Hebrew Bible. Classical and Medieval inter-text exegesis of the Qur’an brings out the piety of Ayyub and the mercy of Allah. See, Anthony H. Johns, “Job”, in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*, Leiden: Brill, 2006, Vol.III, 50-51. Also, Brannon M. Wheeler, “Job”, in *Prophets in the Qur’an: An Introduction to the Qur’an and Muslim Exegesis*. London/N.Y.: Continuum, 2002, 157-160.

6 I first began to articulate the spirituality of the inter-faith pilgrim in, “Dialogue and Culture”, *Focus* [Multan, Pakistan], 21/2 (2001), 113-134. My language is clearly influenced by John O’Donohue. See, *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World*. London: 1997, and *Eternal Echoes: Exploring our Hunger to Belong*. London: 1998.

7 “Anyone who wished to consult the Lord would go to the meeting tent outside the camp.” (Exodus 33:7)

silenced – witness like a rock landscape, quietly present at the heart of a religion externally riven with fracture and fragmentation.

Religious institutions tend to acquire and control. The truly spiritual person can let things be and celebrate presence: natural, personal, divine. The one who truly surrenders with eyes wide open - “having seen you with my own eyes” (Ch.42:6) - recognises and respects the otherness and the beauty of the world and endeavours to transfigure the desire to define oneself through possessions, achievements and power. The one who bows down before the voice in the tempest cuts back the undergrowth of banality, sensation and exteriority which leaves us so distracted and overwhelmed. Then, we, like Ayyub, form a contrast religious culture fundamentally unaffected by things, possessions, achievements, stimulants, distractions; unconcerned with the treadmill of percentages, statistics, ephemeral progress.

A Spirituality of Discovery:

Like Ayyub, we are called to be pilgrims of discovery amidst the crassness of our age. Relentless voyagers, empowered by a magnificent, creative restlessness, we refuse to limit ourselves to one frame of thinking, one language, one religious culture, to our own faith tradition. A monolingual propositional religious tradition closes out the mystery, hollows out faith hidden behind fixed walls of ideology, rules and conventions. Such cultural ghettos form grey fields of quiet desperation. A life-giving spirituality in a multi-religious world calls us to step outside the comfort barriers of the enclosed religious circle isolated in the anonymous city or equally alone in the traditional village. Ayyub fell in love with the danger of reaching out, going beyond, growing into, uniting with. Discovery enlarges and refines our cultural and religious sensibility. Grounded in trust, transparently open to the transcendent, we discover a real and vital equilibrium, the re-convergence of authentic harmony and balance. That is why Ayyub had to move outside his community (“outside the camp”), and suffer at the frontier of human existence, marginalised socially, culturally and religiously.

And yet Ayyub was not a *murtad* (apostate). He was profoundly at home in his own faith tradition, and surely that is why he could live at its threshold with integrity and creativity. Truthful, creative and fragile, Ayyub images a rock outcrop that stand firm with the restless ocean breaking all around. That is where we are called to be.

Spirituality as Dreaming:

The spiritual person is made aware by Allah that at heart faith embraces silence, a silence that echoes in the human heart that surrenders self and opens up to the inner core, to the presence of the living God. Thus rooted, Ayyub could become a person of wild longing, of impossible dreams, of adventure and exploration, of tender power and joyful living.

Free and creative people who inhabit the silent depth within and express it in word and movement, picture and sound, are able to dialogue with followers of other faith traditions. Rooted in one culture, they yet belong to many. Vulnerable inter-faith pilgrims are flexible, open and challenging. Open to the transcendent while enjoying the everyday routine, they liberate each other from religious falsity and religious obsessions and radiate "cosmic compassion" at the heart of Allah's creation. For at the core of all living cultures and religions we encounter a resonant heart, a depth of silence, the Nothing who is All.

A spiritual person of dialogue in a multi-religious world faces the breakage within and the vulnerability of their cultural and religious group. This contrasts sharply with self-satisfied cold conviction, with deadly certainty, with the closed circle. Is it not a sacrilege to imprison Allah in a religious system, or lock the source of life in a tabernacle? Claims to absolute truth is human arrogance at its most dangerous, the kindling wood that blazes into communal conflict, racial hatred, religious violence. Spiritual persons of dialogue have little need of walls, work freely with word and ritual, thrive on imagination, are at home with their own tradition yet yearn to be at home with the other. Spiritual pilgrims are uncluttered and unostentatious; quietly elegant with the subtlety of silence and the simplicity of truth that only a pristine spirit and profound authenticity can gift. All who surrender to the voice from the tempest know themselves to be temporary sojourners on a defenceless planet that belongs to our children's children. They acknowledge that their grip on reality is tenuous, that our one stay and stand is Allah alone in whom we move and live and have our being.

A Spirituality that Gives Birth:

Ayyub's surrender opened him up to see through to the depth of his own faith tradition, that life is gift, that all is grace, that joy is in non-possession. This understanding counters the globalising consumerist culture that grasps and accumulates. Depth (being rooted in) follows ascetical tranquillity, the freedom to leave aside all that is not necessary, for necessities grow fewer by the year. In surrender to the voice in the tempest of our lives we are able to listen to the inner music of the soul,

reengaging the rhythm of nature, yes, even in the midst of ecological devastation. Not isolated in walled-in churches or mosques but willing pilgrims with the uprooted poor in the mega-cities, and even there in rhythm with our own nature, in touch with nature's flow and balance. In the midst of urban fragmentation we allow things to cohere and fit according to their deeper impulse and instinct. Living thus, the eternally Transcendent awakens within.

The spiritual Ayyub travels light, and is rarely burdened with detailed programmes or packed agendas. Like fire-flies that alight upon the skin without the human host feeling the slightest tickle, yet flash brightly and in sufficient numbers create a magnificent night-scape. So too do inter-faith pilgrims radiate new birth, fire new hope, spark with new possibility. Spiritual pilgrims are fully at home with their own faith tradition in all its horror and beauty, with its deviations and truth. The trustful inter-faith pilgrim senses truth without feeling the need to grasp and confine it. They enter into truth's inner reality yet allow truth to remain somehow elusive, for no frontier is too far to reach, no depth too deep to plumb.

Such a spirituality in a religiously diverse world is undertaken by vulnerable persons and wandering communities of faith. Dialogue between people of different faith traditions take place between people who dialogue within their own faith community and who are in dialogue with the most vulnerable members of their cultural domains: the poor, the discarded, the unneeded. And this dialogue – both intra-religious and inter-religious – is about self-worth and self-identity, self-respect and self-acknowledgement. Seeing that no contemporary person belongs to a single culture, we are called to be bridge-builders linking more than one faith tradition.

Pilgrims of dialogue are subtle outsiders, who discover the ancient rhythms of marginalised cultures and the liberative streams of other faith communities while acknowledging their temporary, 'visitor' status. In such 'eccentric' (away from the centre) people insights occur, insights to be shared in community.

A Spirituality that Nurtures:

Acceptance of diversity in our communities, neighbourhoods and nations, mirrors both the complexity of our individual lives and of the multiple cultures in which we are embedded. Acceptance of diversity releases energy and intensifies our personal presence.

You may well ask: where is my own living Christian tradition in all this “wandering at the edge”? The contemporary inter-faith Ayyub walks within an incredible intertwining of multiple streams of ancestry, memory, shadow and light. We witness to continuity while reaching out to the future. Neither clinging to a fabled past nor rejecting an unassimilated tradition, we face our fragility, vulnerability and limitations. There is great poignancy and pathos when we rediscover the riches of our faith in the depth of another’s tradition.

I see the small, Christian congregations scattered across Indonesia as warm but cluttered, reassuring yet numbing, homely yet walled in, encouraging yet to some extent cut off, prayerful yet somewhat deaf to the surrounding ebb and flow of the majority Islamic community. Poetic-prophetic voices such as that of Mangunwijaya (1929-1999)⁸ indicate how we can integrate imagination and thought, wonder and word, fermentation and clarity. A pilgrim-in-dialogue will awaken the wonder of the heart in each culture, engage fellow faith followers in journeys on which seemingly anything and everything is possible. As with the child, all doors are open, all barriers down. Each country has such creative pioneers, plodding a pilgrim way consciously chosen, accepted, renewed. Gently, such paths need to be trodden also by whole religious movements and communities.

Tension between the prophet pioneer and the hesitant community of the faithful is inevitable. Here lies an important role for religious congregations to be cross-cultural bridges of understanding. That being said, it is also clear that both the vision and the activities of Asia’s inter-faith prophets are creating great unease, are disturbing the comfort and complacency of the ritual ghetto. I am hopeful enough to think that our scattered Christian enclaves in Indonesia will never be able to regain their cultural amnesia and religious complacency of colonial days. For, apart from such “troublesome” pilgrims as Mangunwijaya, the tentacles of a globalising market have already disrupted our unreflective belonging, have already broken down the quiet handing-on of faith from this generation to the next. That is why, at this critical juncture we need to raise awkward questions and awaken spiritual longing and belonging in place of a false complacency and satisfaction. Mono-

8 There are few publications in English on the Indonesian novelist, architect, mystic and political activist Mangunwijaya. See Karel Steenbrink, “Y.B. Mangunwijaya’s Blueprint for a Diaspora Church in Indonesia”, *Exchange* 27/1 (1998), 17-36. Also, John Mansford Prior, “From Ghetto to Diaspora: Challenges Facing the Indonesian Churches at a Time of Unrest”, *Mission Studies* XV/2 (1998), 85-102. And, “Portraying the Face of the Nazarene in Contemporary Indonesia: Literature as Frontier-Expanding Mission”, *Pacifica* 14/2 (2001), 172-190.

religious communities shut in upon themselves are losing their soul to market values and have largely lost any wider significance.

A Spirituality that is Courageously Embracing:

Asia, indeed the entire globe, is experiencing a resurgence of ethnic and religious fanaticism, where identity is hewed out narrowly and exclusively in terms of land and blood (*blud und boden*,⁹ territory and ethnicity), where others are viewed as competitors, even enemies, targets of hate and violence. Here creeds can become destructive, indeed poisonous. As we encounter in the more profound strands of religious traditions, truth is hospitable to difference. Genuine faith identity emerges from a transparent conversation between self and the other. There is no true religious self without the embrace of the other.

The uprooting of hundreds of millions of Asians over the past few decades has forced us to not simply live 'by chance' adjacent to other faith communities, but freely to open ourselves up to them in the common cause of creating contrast cultures where human values have a chance to breathe.

The Ayyubs of today discover that there is little demand for exhaustive descriptions, but much to be gained from listening to imaginative suggestions, to artistic images, to poetic statements. In a word, we return to the truth as announced by the prophets in each of our faith traditions in awakening miracle, probing parable, questioning word. Multi-faith pilgrims embrace diversity in the adventure of discovery. The gift of dialogue is not an easy path to follow. Like sailing the ocean there are no fixed points, no certain current, and yet there is a direction and there are stars indicating, beckoning on.

Is such a pilgrim for ever cool, calm and collected? Not at all. Without moments of anger at crass injustice we truncate our faith. Anger, like a fire, lights up what is wrong.¹⁰ Anger can be a great force for change as it names and confronts injustice.¹¹ The children of righteous anger are courage and creativity.

A Spirituality that is Confidently Pliable:

Fanaticism inflames with communal hatred while ghettos numb us into passivity. Meanwhile contemporary Ayyubs live in "bold humility",

9 *Blud und Boden* – (Indonesian "*tanah tumpah darah*") unfortunately a slogan that is often used to justify wars of expansion and appropriation.

10 See, Gospel of Luke 12:49-53.

11 See, Gospel of Matthew 21:12-16; 23:13-39.

calm yet active and able to smile with dignity like the poor while facing and responding to adversity. The dignity of the poor and of the spiritual person is expressed in beauty and wonder. For such pilgrims are able to view themselves with affection, understanding and respect. Their sense of self is not dependent upon the affirmation of the majority community – whoever they may be. They recognise their limits but still embrace life with affection and graciousness. Thus, they enjoy a growing sense of inner dignity, free from the affirmation of outer voices and less troubled by the negativity of others. Confident and subtle in their tradition they are not stiff or arrogant or aloof. Contemporary Ayyubs are immensely pliable and hold their sense of worthiness and honour in a larger horizon of grace and graciousness. They, again like the poor, keep a space of tranquillity, and no amount of communal conflict or persecution can rob them from this gracious stance. If, as religious communities, we do not dispense with our calm certainty, then no event, situation or person can take it away from us. This is the true alternative to allowing the numerous religious enclaves in Asia from becoming either closed ritual ghettos or fanatic ethnic communities.

Such open faith communities, when they root themselves in tradition while being open to contemporary environments, evolve a series of languages to articulate experience, feelings, life itself. Like Ayyub we are restless until we rest in Allah. It is a divine restlessness, a continual longing. And so, open faith communities are never quite at one with themselves, and their identity can never be fixed in a reconstructed past. New thoughts and experiences emerge, delight, and surprise. Prophets and poets are wanderers who are always tempted by new horizons. Regular worship gives a visible, outer consistency while its inner life, its yearning heart, is nomadic.

We should not demand that the insights of the inter-faith Ayyub be contained in purely linear concepts, in a single symbol, a solitary dominant image. When local faith communities lose contact with one another, and with their wider environments – natural, cultural, religious – they gradually lose depth and diversity of presence. What remains are simply conventional rituals and functions handed-down, where everything tends to flatten into a panel of sameness. There is no system or frame large enough to hold the immensity of Truth. Great theologians and mystics have always acknowledged this.

This new catholicity (universality) calls for global networks, open to each other and to the tradition rather than a monolithic centrally-managed institution concerned with maintenance, conventionality and conformity. There is a depth of presence in the inculturated community

that can never be reduced in order to comply to a surface uniformity. This should not imply an overeager “instrumentalising” of other religious traditions, for instance Christians taking over Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu traditions, what Aloysius Pieris of Sri Lanka calls a “species of theological vandalism”.¹² The composite cultural identities that are emerging from multi-cultural and multi-faith encounters are blossoming from a joint understanding of reverential human values: freedom and responsibility, compassion and solidarity, justice and harmony. Such composite cultural identities – in contrast to the imposed, bland trade-marks of the global market – emerge as a by-product of common action for social justice rather than as the planned target of an official commission for dialogue. Lasting, transparent identities result from prolonged cultural osmosis and this occurs in singularly creative persons and small-scale communities whether Christian or Muslim or inter-faith - or maybe simply ‘human’ - as we work to alleviate suffering and witness to a more just, human and sustainable society.

A Spirituality that Transforms Imaginatively:

As individuals, communities and world-wide institutions we are part of the world of power. This involves everything from social access or social exclusion to decision-making or domination. The spiritual person sides with the culture of the silenced and enjoys the popular culture of the marginalised. But yes, life is complicated, practice is more than often somewhat ambivalent. How do we inculturate a powerful centuries-old, structured tradition into the world of the numbed, of the silenced, of the not-needed? Partnership exists between rough equals, domination between the strong and the weak. That is a challenge.

When free to enjoy the world of the imagination, culture is experienced at its most expressive and demonstrative, culture at play but also culture shaping humankind’s deepest hopes and most urgent questions. Here the world of the imagination merges with the world of religion. In symbol and performance we celebrate the world of discovery, insight and meaning. Here we encounter the ultimate meaning of life.

In the ongoing process of inter-faith encounter, the incremental creation of multiple cultural identities occurs through supplementation or continuance. The contrast here is with, firstly, a prescriptive approach that is legislated for (enjoined, decreed, imposed or controlled from above) whether by bishops or mullahs. Secondly, the contrast is with dynamic equivalence, the translation of one religious tradition into another cultural

¹² Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988, 53-55, also 38-40.

form. And, thirdly, the contrast is with creative assimilation that starts with openness to the insights of the religious other. In short, the contemporary Ayyub imbibes a spirituality that is truly dynamically transformative.

To Conclude:

Listening to, and learning from, other religious traditions is vital. Dialogue is a search for truth, and truth needs dialogue because there is always “more” to truth, a surplus beyond our present individual or collective grasp of it. Allah remains Allah and is not synonymous with our grasp of the truth, nor with the particular take of our individual faith-traditions. For, “revelation in no way limits Allah’s freedom and power, but rather manifests it.”¹³ Thus we mutually enrich each other, indeed convert each other to a purer, clearer perception of Truth within and beyond our own faith tradition.

When Truth is none other than Allah and our various teachings are acknowledged as stuttering attempts to give human language to our faith, then the advantages of religious diversity are obvious: we listen to “the other” to acknowledge our limits and deepen our own attempts at being grasped by Truth. However sacred and central our truth-statements, what are they but our necessary spluttering, which in the face of Truth is reduced to silence. Truth is not something we possess, but Someone who possesses us.

Together we need to clarify our ultimate intentions, hopes and dreams for the world, for our multi-cultural and multi-religious societies. Is living together religiously, pluralistically, in harmony, our innermost desire or only our accommodation to reality? It brings us to the unanswered question about whether we view religious pluralism as *de jure* or only *de facto*, a welcome reality or simply something we ought to tolerate.

Allow me to end with a short quote from Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), a citation that sustains me as I witness the present-day brutalisation of religious convictions and cultures, and yet wish to remain open to myriad opportunities for mutual enrichment and mutual conversion in our religiously and culturally diverse world:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime:
Therefore we must be saved by *hope*.
Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense
In any immediate context of history:
Therefore we must be saved by *faith*.

13 Donald J. Goergen, “Dialogue and Truth”, *Focus* [Multan, Pakistan], 21/2 (2001), 96-112. Quote from p.106.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone:
Therefore we must be saved by *love*.¹⁴
Amen to that!

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- Last but not least, sincere thanks to the Metanoia Bible Group in Maumere Prison [*Rumah Tahanan*] who helped me plumb depths of meaning in The Book of Job.

14 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*. University of Chicago reprint 2008.