

Interspirituality and Unsayings:
Apophatic Strategies for Departicularizing Christ and the Church in Current
Roman Catholic Mystical Movements

Kenneth Rose
Christopher Newport University

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Wayne Teasdale invented the term *interspirituality* to call attention to what he characterizes as an “already existing and thriving community” of interspiritual pioneers in the world’s religions who are trying to “evolve a higher view” of the religions and humanity by stressing the spiritual interdependence of the religions of the world.¹ As Teasdale describes it, interspirituality is a fertile and synthetic movement that is bringing together people who simultaneously follow one or more of the spiritual practices of the many religions in the world.

Teasdale’s list of interspiritual pioneers outside the Catholic tradition is impressionistic and he breezily clumps together the Dalai Lama, Masao Abe, and unnamed Hindus who are “passionately committed to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.”² More central to interspirituality and giving it its Christian theological character is a core group of Roman Catholics from the last four centuries who shared the common vision of the Christianization of Hinduism

and India. This group includes the seventeenth century Jesuit missionary and self-proclaimed sannyasi Roberto de Nobili, the nineteenth century convert to Catholicism Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, the twentieth century French priest Jules Monchanin and the Benedictine monk Henri Le Saux—better known as Abhishiktananda, and Teasdale’s Catholic guru, the Benedictine Bede Griffiths, who initiated him in India as a “Christian sannyasi,” or renunciant, which is a title that is about as odd as “Hindu cardinal.”

Teasdale portrays this lineage of indigenizing and contextualizing Catholics as visionaries looking for a way to bring about the “convergence”³ of Hinduism and Christianity—a hope dramatically expressed in Bede Griffith’s romantic exclamation when he left England for the subcontinent: “I’m going out to India to seek the other half of my soul.”⁴ Reading these words, the casual reader may think of Griffiths as a Catholic monk who had come under the influence of Hinduism and was now going to India to find a guru and get enlightened like the many other lapsed Catholics in the West who have turned to Indian and other Asian spiritualities since the 1960s. But, as is clear from his writings, Griffith’s differed little in aim from his predecessor in India, the Jesuit Jules Monchanin, who wrote:

“I have come to India for no other purpose than to awaken in a few souls the desire to raise up a Christian India. I think the problem is of the same magnitude as the Christianization, in former times, of Greece. It will take centuries, sacrificed lives, and we shall perhaps die before seeing any realizations. A Christian India, completely Indian and completely Christian, will be something so wonderful; to prepare it from afar, the sacrifice of our lives is not too much to ask.”⁵

This threatening vision of a Christian India, so beloved of the pioneers of interspirituality, implies not a plural quest of spiritual equals for an interspirituality but rather an inclusivistic attempt to transform Hinduism into an ethnic variety of Christianity—an outcome that would be a tragic loss for India, Hinduism, and humankind. In a recent interview with the magazine *U.S. Catholic*, Teasdale asserts an inclusivistic and sovereign view of the Roman Catholic church in relation to other religions that is in step with his particularistic lineage. When the interviewer points out that “[s]ome church leaders seem nervous about too much “interspirituality” and in recent church documents seem to be asserting the church as the “one true religion,” Teasdale responds:

“Well, first of all, let me say, we do have the one true religion. But I don’t think that we should be broadcasting that. We may believe that, but I think that the gospel compels us to have sensitivity to people of other traditions who have no desire to be Catholic or Christian.”⁶

He also claims in this interview that:

“. . . the Catholic tradition is, without question, the greatest of these traditions in terms of what it has done for the world.”⁷

This does not appear to be the apophatic and pluralistic stance of a seeker who sees himself as one interspiritual pilgrim among many others who are searching together for truth. Rather, it seems to be the stance of a religious booster who knows something about his own religion that his fellow pilgrims don't yet know, but may one day be privileged to understand. There is a degree of certitude in this viewpoint that is not justified by the partiality and finitude of every human vantage point. An apophatic and pluralistic interspirituality, however, would respect the sovereignty of each religion and reject the a priori, self-serving, and presently unverifiable belief that one's own religion is the culmination other people's religions.

We can make sense of this apparent confusion in Teasdale's theology of religions if we remember that he thinks that in this so-called “Interspiritual Age,”⁸ the Roman Catholic Church “has decided to offer itself as a bridge that allows other religions to discover the source of their common identity in community.”⁹ Thanks to this bridging function, Teasdale claims that

“the Church also becomes a matrix of intermysticism and the spiritual life as all forms of the inner experience take

root in its being, and the universal elements shine forth in all its sons and daughters.”¹⁰

Although Teasdale sees this as a generous gesture from the Church, we can get a sense of its imperialistic ambition and implausibility if we imagine a Jehovah’s Witness, a Southern Baptist, or a Muslim, making a similar claim for those religions. The idea that the Catholic church is the parent of all of the other religions may be a pleasant fantasy for some Catholics to indulge, but it will strike the outsider as ludicrously paternalistic and, given the history of this church’s relations to other faiths, both Christian and non-Christian, as a dangerous power-grab that must steadily be resisted.

Teasdale’s viewpoint is more than just a fantasy of a few inclusivists, since it is solidly grounded in post-Vatican II Roman Catholic teaching about the religions of the world. Before this council, which met in the early sixties, Roman Catholicism was exclusivistic and, as Douglas Pratt claims, “the notion of establishing any kind of dialogical relationship with any other religion was an idea on the fringes.”¹¹ This attitude changed dramatically when the Second Vatican Council issued a “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” (1965)—a declaration that is better known by its Latin nickname *Nostra Aetate*.

From the perspective of the older, insular Catholicism this is an extraordinary document, for it may well mark the first time in the history of

the orthodox branches of Christianity that the salvific value of other religions is explicitly affirmed. The irenic proclamation of the Council that other religions “often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men” resounded throughout the church and inspired an astonishing and previously unthinkable explosion of interest among Catholics, particularly monastics, in the teaching and practices of other religions. This trend within Roman Catholicism was further strengthened by Rome in other Vatican documents, such as *Lumen Gentium* (1964), which included other religions in the “plan of salvation,”¹² *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964), which places the Catholic church directly at the center of what John Hick later was to call the universe of faiths,¹³ and “Dialogue and Proclamation” (1991), in which the Vatican attempts to parse the difference between preaching to members of other religions and talking to them about their religions.¹⁴

Although *Nostra Aetate* was a landmark document in the history of orthodox Christianity, marking as it did a modest, long overdue, and overly celebrated move from Christian exclusivism to Christian inclusivism, it also firmly reasserted Christ as the one way through which God “reconciled all things to himself.”¹⁵ Despite the concession about the salvific value of other religions, this declaration makes clear that the Vatican views religious truth in all of its varieties as Christocentric—as beginning and ending in Jesus

Christ. While many Catholics were inspired by the apparent liberality of this proclamation, an outsider is struck more by its impudence than by its generosity, since this inclusivistic position paternalistically implies that the other religions are at best incipient forms of Catholic piety.

In line with these Vatican proclamations, Teasdale thinks that Jesus is behind the religions, drawing all of them to himself through their distinctive practices and beliefs. For Teasdale, as for official Roman Catholicism, the doctrine of the Church and Christ as the only way to God is an absolute and objective truth that can never be doubted. So Teasdale thinks that Catholics can give up the old missionary tactics in order to

“find a different approach besides the evangelical approach, which just doesn’t work. After all these centuries of missionary activity in Asia, only 2 percent of Asia is Christian. There’s something wrong. The model isn’t working. When people in Rome [are critical of interspirituality], they’re showing their lack of faith in the Holy Spirit. They think it all depends on them. It doesn’t depend on them at all. That’s the role they’ve given themselves, that they’ve got to defend and protect. Often what they’re doing is obstructing the Holy Spirit in the name of protecting the faith.”¹⁶

And so, with a radical confidence grounded in God’s love and salvific will as revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Teasdale, like Griffiths and Monchanin before him, believes that he can lose himself in the practice of other religions in the certain knowledge that in the end he will

find Christ as the true mystery latent in the *saccidananda* of the Upanishads and the *shunyata* of Buddhism. For if Jesus is truly lord and wants all people to be saved, then no mere religion—whether Hinduism, Buddhism, or Christianity—can frustrate God’s intention of saving everyone in Christ. Consequently, old missionary strategies that might offend people of other religions can be abandoned, since what is true in those religions actually comes from Christ and points to Christ. Hindus don’t need to be converted, since if they are encouraged to be as true Hindus as they can be, then Hinduism will lead them now or in the afterlife to fullness of life in Christ, just as surely as a ray of sunlight in a darkened room here below can be traced back to the sun.

This inclusivistic belief motivated the missionary work of Teasdale’s mentor, Bede Griffiths, who spent forty years in India. Griffiths wrote that:

“If Christ is present to all men, then the Church is also present in all mankind. There is one movement of the Church which is visible in history, which we can trace in its progress from Jerusalem over the Graeco-Roman world, then over Europe and America and now [is] about to enter into vital contact with Asia and Africa. But there is also a hidden movement of the Church going on in the hearts of men drawing men to Christ without their knowing it, in Hinduism, in Buddhism, in Islam, even in agnosticism and unbelief. It is only at the last day that the full significance of this movement will be revealed, but even now we can discern something of this hidden path of grace in the other religions of the world.”¹⁷

This is nothing more than a new, contextualized version of the old missionary propaganda about Jesus, for the Roman Catholic Church is as likely the bearer of the last human word about the divine as is the Southern Baptist Convention, Islam, or the Jehovah's Witnesses. To think like this is like saying that people who speak French would be happier if they spoke English, but since they don't, we English-speakers will strain every nerve to show them that French is actually an English dialect. Or it's like saying that your mother is actually my mother, and that since you will be happier when you realize that, then I will strain every nerve to help you see that your mother is actually my mother.

The most stubborn forms of Christian particularism show a persistent inability to understand that believing that Jesus is the final truth is only a presently verified truth for those who are already inclined to think that way. To insist that this dogma is true against every objection is to reveal oneself as a hardened dogmatist who bends everything to the verification of the dogma—like a no-tax advocate calling for tax cuts even when the treasury is empty. This dogmatism closes Christian particularists off to the deeper and more challenging dialogue that puts this claim at risk and entertains the possibility that some other religion may have a more comprehensive truth than Christianity—a possibility that may actually explain the attraction of

some of these Christian figures to the study of Hinduism. An interspirituality that does not enter into this sort of risk and does not wrestle with the real possibility of conversion to other religions turns out to be only a new and more deceptive way of doing missionary work. There is nothing to celebrate here for people of other religions, unless they also think that the destiny of their own religions is to become fulfilled children of the Roman Catholic Church.

When I began to research interspirituality, I was under the impression that it was a popular mystical movement that was trying deparicularize Christianity and to resituate Christian theology as pluralistic. But it turns out that interspirituality is merely another form of Christian inclusivism that wants to recast as truths in Christ what it admires in other religions—as if I were to say that not only do I admire your partner, but I claim your partner as my own as well. This an incoherent and condescending viewpoint, and well-informed practitioners of other religion are not likely to accept so alien a view of their religions. This interpretation will impress only the naïve or the fearful, people who know little about their own religions or whose confidence in their own religions has been undermined by the dogma that Christ is the only way.

It turns out, then, that Teasdale's version of interspirituality fails to live up to its name. To be worthy of so suggestive and hopeful a name as interspirituality a theology of religions needs to be both apophatic and pluralistic. As a general principle, I want to claim that no theology can truly be pluralistic if it is not apophatic, and no genuinely apophatic theology can fail to be pluralistic.

Before making a few suggestions about the crafting of a theology of religions that is both apophatic and pluralistic, I want first to respond to the potent criticism that pluralistic theologies of religions are themselves particularistic, or inclusivistic, and so fail to live up to the ideal of pluralism. According to this criticism, the exclusivistic pluralist dogmatically claims that due to epistemological and/or metaphysical indeterminateness, no particular religious viewpoint can be final, while the inclusivistic pluralist narcissistically allows that perhaps eventually particularists will come to see that a kind of metaphysical indeterminateness is the deeper meaning of Christ, shunyata, Brahman, and so forth.

To view pluralistic interpretations of religion as particularisms that have universalized themselves cuts two ways. If, for the sake of argument, pluralists accept this charge and agree that it undercuts any negative, universal claim that they might make about, for example, Jesus, then the

particularist will also have to admit that this charge also undercuts any positive, universal claim they would like to make about Jesus. So the price of giving up the negative, pluralist claim about Jesus is a price that pluralists may be willing to pay in order to undercut the universalizing of positive and inclusivistic claims about Jesus—such as the claim that he is the hope of the world, the one way to the father, and so on.

Another response to the charge that pluralism is merely another form of inclusivism is to point out that pluralism does not necessarily assume that the many religions tend toward nondualism or mystical irrationalism, for that would be as paternalistic as any other kind of inclusivism. All that pluralism needs to claim is that the truth or falsity of religious beliefs is not presently determinable. To go beyond that is to move beyond what evidence and human finitude allow into confessions of faith—which are excellent in themselves, but, given our present limitations, remain a matter of personal or communal preference.

The objection to pluralism as just another form of inclusivism that has the quality of a sterile argument in which the winning of merely logical points is accompanied by the exclamation of *touché!* It betrays a narcissistic mentality that refuses to grant the same degree of reality to the other as it grants to the self. It shows a real inability to place oneself in the shoes of the

other, for if we were to do this with the kind of radicalness that would allow us to inhabit a competing inclusivism, then we would break free from the tyranny of our own unmediated particularisms and take the first real step toward pluralism.

Against the final refusal of the other that is represented by an obstinate particularism, there can be no further discussion. This is a brute self-assertion and refusal of the other that is logically isomorphic to racism and ethnocentrism. The pluralism advocated in this paper differs from narcissistic particularism in its openness to conversion to the standpoint of the other. It is this radical risk of openness to the point of identity with the other that constitutes the specific difference between pluralism and the varieties of particularism.

With this objection overcome, I would like to suggest what an apophatic and pluralistic theology of religions may look like. When the religions learn to apophatically unsay their central teachings, when they can unsay themselves with the same passion that they say themselves, then they will be ready to engage in what Douglas Pratt calls “a collective religious quest”¹⁸ and give up the struggle for supremacy. As human organizations engaged, among other things, in a quest to understand the spiritual nature of life, religions should interact pluralistically with each other as formal equals

engaged in a mutual search for adequate responses to the spiritual dimension of life. A pluralistic theology of religions is a common quest for wisdom that is less the dialogue of cagey players thinking about hidden agendas and more the enthusiastic bonding that occurs among people from different countries on pilgrimage together. Each pilgrim will have laid aside the idea that my religion is unquestionably the truest and best way for others as well as for me. This is not relativism, because there is no denial that it is logically possible that from an absolute standpoint one of these religions may be more comprehensive than another. It is the humble recognition that there is no infallible means given to human beings in this life to establish conclusively the supremacy of any one of the many religious ways available to us. Rather than trying to make converts or prove the supremacy of one religion over the others, it would be truer to the actual limitations of human knowledge to see followers of other religions as fellow pilgrims with whom we can share our tips about the journey and pick up theirs as we travel on together.

Christian particularists, such as Teasdale, can demonstrate that they are ready to be just one pilgrim among many others by becoming willing to remove Jesus from the center of the religious life of humanity. I am not saying that Christians ought to remove Jesus from the center of the Christian

life, nor am I saying that Christians ought to stop thinking that Jesus is of the utmost importance for Christians. What I am saying is that Christians have an ethical and theological obligation to refrain from claiming or implying that people who worship at other altars worship false or lesser divinities.

This moral and theological criticism is directed not only at the obvious case of the many conservative Christians who think that Jesus is the only way and that those without explicit faith in Christ are destined for eternal damnation.

It is also directed at moderate Christians who tolerate and even appreciate other religions while never doubting that Jesus is the hope of the world.

This call to departicularize Christianity will be disturbing to particularistic Christians who have raised their beliefs and practices into universal truths that are asserted as valid and binding for all human beings. Disturbing as this call may be for some Christians, it is a necessary step that Christianity must take if it wants to live up to its own deepest truth and the demands of justice. Alongside these theological and ethical reasons for departicularizing itself, Christians should also consider that departicularization is inevitable in any case, since it is an unavoidable result of the ongoing movement of time and history and emphasizes what is true about religions when seen as products of human culture. Against the background of hundreds of thousands of years of prerecorded and recorded human

history, to claim that any particular religion is the final religion and essential to the spiritual life of humanity is like saying that one particular society is the final society and essential to the social life of humanity. As influential as Rome was, and as important as the United States may be to many of us today, neither is final nor essential to human well-being. If human life continues for another 100,000 years or more, will any significant trace of either of these societies remain? One can only wonder at what the successor religions to today's religions will look like a hundred millennia from now—if humans survive that long. Will any significant trace of today's religions persist in those future religions?

Viewed against such a broad vista, departicularization can be seen as Christianity's future, whether it creatively embraces it for theological and ethical reasons or whether the passage of time forcibly departicularizes it. At this point in its own journey, then, Christianity must decide whether it will remain particularistic or will embrace pluralism. The Christianity of the future will, I believe, thrive to the degree that it chooses pluralism and, obeying Jesus' apophatic and kenotic command to take up the cross and die to self, renounces particularism. Out of this death, there will emerge a new, interspiritual Christianity that no longer relies upon the fiction of its supremacy over other religions. That will be a Christianity worth seeing.

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¹ Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 1999), 27-28.

² Teasdale, *Mystic Heart*, 32.

³ Teasdale, *Mystic Heart*, 34.

⁴ Quoted in Wayne Teasdale. "Bede Griffiths as Mystic and Icon of Reversal." *America*, 30 September 1995), 22.

⁵ Quoted in Sita Ram Goel, *Catholic Ashrams: Sannyasins or Swindlers*, 2d ed (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1994), 83, 189-190.

⁶ Wayne Teasdale, quoted in "How to be an Urban Mystic," *U.S. Catholic*, March 2003, 30.

⁷ Wayne Teasdale, quoted in "How to be an Urban Mystic," *U.S. Catholic*, March 2003, 30.

⁸ Teasdale, *Mystic Heart*, 16.

⁹ Teasdale, *Mystic Heart*, 248.

¹⁰ Teasdale, *Mystic Heart*, 248.

¹¹ Douglas Pratt, "The Dance of Dialogue: Ecumenical Inter-religious Engagement" *The Ecumenical Review* 51 (July 1999): 279.

¹² Pratt, "Dance of Dialogue," 280.

¹³ Pratt, "Dance of Dialogue," 280.

¹⁴ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 119-122.

¹⁵ Pratt, "Dance of Dialogue," 280.

¹⁶ Wayne Teasdale, quoted in "How to be an Urban Mystic." *U.S. Catholic* 68 (March 2003): 30.

¹⁷ Bede Griffiths, *Christ in India* (Bangalore, 1986), 177 (quoted in Goel, *Catholic Ashrams*, 67).

¹⁸ Pratt, "Dance of Dialogue," 281.