

[Interspirituality](#)

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RELIGION

Interspirituality

Interfaith dialogue or dissembling monologue?

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Wayne Teasdale (1945-2005), a popular catholic spiritual writer, invented the term interspirituality to designate a fertile and syncretic movement that is bringing together people who simultaneously follow one or more of the spiritual practices of the many religions in the world.

Central to Teasdale's interspirituality 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 17th-century Jesuit missionary and self-proclaimed sannyasin Roberto de Nobili, 19th-century convert to Catholicism Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, 20th-century priest Jules Monchanin and Teasdale's Catholic "guru, " Bede Griffiths. Teasdale portrays this lineage as visionaries looking for a way to bring about the "convergence " of Hinduism and Christianity. Monchanin 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." This vision of a Christian India, so beloved of the pioneers of interspirituality, implies not a plural quest of spiritual equals for an exchange, but rather an inclusivistic attempt to transform Hinduism into an ethnic variety of Catholicism--an outcome that would be a tragic loss for India, Hinduism and humankind.

For Teasdale, in this so-called "Interspiritual Age " the Roman Catholic Church "has decided to offer itself as a bridge that allows other religions to discover the source of their common identity." Although Teasdale sees this as a generous gesture from the Church, non-Catholics can get a sense of its imperialistic ambition and

implausibility if we imagine a Jehovah's Witness, a Baptist or a Muslim making a similar claim for their 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 paternalistic and--given the long history of this church's relations to other faiths, both Christian and non-Christian--as a dangerous power-grab that must steadily be resisted.

Despite the concession made by the II Vatican Council about the salvific value of other religions, the Council's declaration also 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 position paternalistically implies that the other religions are at best incipient forms of Catholic piety.

This inclusivistic belief motivated the missionary work of Teasdale's mentor, Bede Griffiths, who spent forty years in India. Griffiths wrote, "If Christ is present to all men, then the Church is also present in all mankind. There is 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."

Such dogmatism closes its adherents off to the deeper and more challenging dialogue that puts this claim about Jesus 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 and Buddhism. 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 daughters 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 to recast 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. This is an incoherent and condescending viewpoint, and well-informed practitioners of other religions are not likely to accept so alien a view of their own

religions. This interpretation will impress only the naive or the fearful, people who know little about their own religions or whose confidence in their own religions has been undermined by missionary propaganda about Christ as the only way.

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. They should join in 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. 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.

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. They do not have a right to insist that it is Jesus who is the living truth hiding in the center of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and other religions. 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 final word of God to humanity.

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 one and essential to all of humanity. 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? We can be certain, however, that if religion survives, it will be recognizable as religion by reference to the eternal teaching that all true religions teach: the insufficiency of the material world and the saving and universal care and compassion of the divine.

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