

[Rio-lizing God's Presence in Brazil](#)

Category : [August 1992](#)

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Rio-lizing God's Presence in Brazil

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Dear Self of myself, aloha from Hawaii!

Your letters were on my desk when we returned from the Earth Summit in Rio. Faced with either responding to you or writing the monthly editorial on time, this seemed a creative solution. Hope you don't mind 150,000 people reading our mail.

Frankly, I first thought your comments terribly unfair to Dr. Harvey Cox. We have always seen in him a sincere and informed soul, and his work at Harvard's Divinity School is generally regarded as an enlightened beacon searching beyond the darkness of religious fundamentalism and triumphalism. Since you had sent it, I did go through his book *Many Mansions: A Christian's Encounter with Other Faiths*. As you say, he was more generous and thoughtful in his encounters with Judaism and Islam, but that's perfectly reasonable, since he is more familiar with those traditions, more at home on their turf, so to speak.

It was more saddening than maddening to read the comment he published about Krishna's looking like "Mickey Mouse in drag." It was both unnecessary and unfortunate. Can you imagine his saying anything remotely like that about the Prophet Mohammed or Moses? Certainly not. One can only wonder how Dr. Cox would respond to a similarly distasteful portrayal of his own beloved Jesus.

My own observation about his written encounter with Hinduism is ambivalent. He chose to neglect the profundity behind Hindu Imagery. He didn't mention a single word about yoga, kundalini or Self Realization. Nor a syllable about the lofty

philosophical inquiries of the Upanishads which pre-date Christianity by who knows how many centuries. Worse, he really did not take Hinduism seriously, a sensibility he reserved for encounters with the Semetic faiths. Maybe he had a bad day. Maybe he felt a need to intimate to his Christian colleagues that all those years of ecumenical discussion had not drawn him away from the fold. Maybe he just wanted to speak of his personal, unique and imperfect adventure. Behind it all, he was certainly providing Christians with the possibility that knowing more about other religions can actually strengthen and inform, and need not threaten one's beliefs.

If you do go ahead and write to Dr. Cox of your reaction to his book, keep in mind at even this look at Hinduism, coming from a Christian theologian to Christians totally oblivious of the world's oldest living faith, may be at least a rough and unfinished schematic for much-needed bridges. After all, this is the same man who wrote on the last page of that same book, "We cannot allow denominations, hierarchies and confessional strife to continue to run their course as though what happened in the 'sacred realm' lay outside our human capacity to mold and steer."

Back, now, to Rio de Janeiro. Something happened there in early June that may give you hope for a future in which there is truer tolerance among world faiths. As you know from my fax, Sivaya Subramuniaswami and I were there to join about seventy-five religious leaders in a dialog with three hundred parliamentarians. Don't presume for a moment that the politicians needed such a handicap. It was more a matter that every politician on the planet was already in Rio for the Earth Summit, so naturally they outnumbered us. Apart from the usual things you would expect from such a gathering, something quite unusual, maybe even extraordinary, took place there. I was not really prepared for it, nor was it on anyone's agenda. But it happened.

From the opening address by a US Senator to the closing remarks by religious leaders three days later, virtually everyone acknowledged the sacredness of existence. I know what you're thinking, "Big deal. That principle has only been around for a hundred centuries. My own grandmother taught me that on her knee." Sure she did, but that's not the point. Your grandmother was a Hindu, and the presence of the divine within nature - within a tree or a river or a rough-hewn rock - is the Hindu way. In Rio it was not just the Hindus, Jains and Sikhs who were saying these things. It was everyone. Politicians propounded it. Business people professed it. Priests preached it. Musical poets praised it. It ran like an unseen thread through every speech, through every call for a change in human behavior.

Such a thing did not happen at the previous Global Forum meetings. It definitely did not happen in Oxford in 1988; it may have been an unspoken insight in Moscow in 1990. But in Rio it was being said loud and clear. Nature is sacred. Life is sacred. It is a desecration to destroy this precious and holy creation. It is a sacrilege which, if continued, will surely end in our own death as a species.

Senator Al Gore spoke of the wrongful "assumption that we are somehow separate from nature." The wonderful Brazilian Archbishop Camara made this rather stunning statement, "We are inside God. How can I hate if I am part of God? This is incredible, but true. If God is everywhere, it means we are inside God, and we have God inside ourselves." India's Bishop Gregorius spoke of "immanence and transcendence." African priestesses shared the vision that life is sacred, plants are sacred, animals are sacred. Jain leaders called for "reverence of all forms of life." Jewish theologian Dr. Susannah Heschel noted, "Too many religious leaders present God as remote and transcendent." Acharya Sushil Kumar led a meditation, "Go deep and deeper. Feel oneness with all living beings." There is a power in these spiritual voices, a power competent enough to change our future.

Yet another expression of this universal embracing of a sacred universe was found in the bountiful declarations, covenants and appeals cranked out by so many energetic groups. The Declaration of the Sacred Earth Gathering stated, "We believe that the universe is sacred because all is one. We believe in the sanctity and the integrity of all life and life forms." An Earth Charter offered, "Life is sacred. Each of the diverse forms of life has its own intrinsic value. Human beings are not outside of or above the community of life. We have not woven the web of life; we are but a strand within it." The Earth Covenant, A Citizens' Treaty for Common Ecological Security used similar terms, "All life forms are sacred. Each human being is a unique and integral part of the Earth's community of life and has a special responsibility to care for life in all its diverse forms."

It was a virtual mantra in Rio. "God is everywhere. Life is sacred." This will seem a normal insight to you, and on an individual level it is. But coming from every corner in Rio it took on the empyreal visage of an earth-wide revelation, the gospel according to everyone, the new spiritual consensus. No one really commented on it that I heard, and there were seven thousand journalists on hand to ferret things out. It was one of those things that is too obvious to speak of. Like the air, it was everywhere, its invisible presence firing the furnaces of confabulation - unnoticed.

If this vision is not just a Brazilian anomaly, and if it is as popular as it appeared to be, and if it continues, as I suspect it may, to be spread as part of the ecological theology, then mankind may have found a common religious ground. Not a new religion, mind you. But an article of faith which all religions can affirm. Imagine if the spiritual traditions teach the sacredness of the universe, then our hurtful impulses will certainly be harnessed. If God is acknowledged as immanent in all things and all beings, then zealous religionists may be less eager to embark on crusades and conquests which destroy cultures and disintegrate communities. Seeing God everywhere need not diminish His transcendence, though it may well diminish our penchant for the petty and the homicidal.

That's a lot of "ifs," and a less sanguine view would confess that the world is a very which all faiths are valued and none demeaned or dominated, when the Golden Rule is applied even to those unlike ourselves. But don't you think this rediscovery of God's presence here on earth, in life and all around us could be a source of renewed progress toward genuine pluralism? Such divine immediacy cannot help but change the attitudes and behavior of combative dogmatists, like squabbling siblings who behave better when mother and father are in the room.

Rio had an interesting closing message for those in business, art, politics, science and religion who hold to the my-path-is-the-only-path pathology. It came from an unlikely source, Swiss billionaire Stephan Schmidheiny, "Those groups that go on believing they are the sole repository of truth will become redundant."

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