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SHIFTING IDENTITY

The Contribution of Feminist Thought to Theologies of Religious Pluralism

Jeannine Hill Fletcher

At the turn of the twenty-first century, persons find themselves increasingly in contact with religious difference. In the academy, this contact fuels the projects of comparative religious studies and theologies of religious pluralism. These projects suggest that the scholar of religion and the theologian can no longer theorize (or theologize) in the splendid isolation of a singular tradition, but each must realize his or her own religious particularity in the midst of religious plurality. Yet although discussions of religious pluralism have proliferated (especially in the last half of the twentieth century), one particular discipline has been noticeably absent from the conversation: the distinct perspective of feminist thought has not yet fully engaged the issues of religious pluralism.

This absence has been duly noted. In 1998 Ursula King identified feminism as “the missing dimension in the dialogue of religions,” critiquing the recent surge of interreligious projects as harboring a certain narrowness of practice: “Such narrowness is evident with regard to the marginalization, invisibility and exclusion of women, for wherever interreligious dialogue has developed, women seem to have had little part in it, at least at the official level. Proof for this is found in every single book on interfaith dialogue, religious pluralism, the theology of religions, or the ‘wider ecumenism’ of global interreligious encounter.”¹ Critical of androcentric practices that miss the distinct contribution of women’s voices, King also challenges feminist theology to pursue more actively the encounter with different religions. Hence, the void at the intersection of feminist theology and religious pluralism casts a critical shadow onto both sides of the discussion: neither the discipline of interreligious studies and dialogue nor that of feminist theology and theory can be exempt from responsibility.

¹ Ursula King, “Feminism: The Missing Dimension in the Dialogue of Religions,” in *Pluralism and the Religions: The Theological and Political Dimensions*, ed. John D’Arcy May (London: Cassell, 1998), 42.

Rita Gross presses the issue by raising the concern that, “in ignoring religious diversity, feminist theology has stopped short of its goal of genuine inclusivity, [and has] even lost ground.”² She has also challenged feminist theology by asking whether its community is a “religiously diverse neighborhood or Christian ghetto.” A roundtable conversation in 2000 with Gross and other feminist thinkers responding to this challenge produced several compelling reasons why feminist theology ought to be more involved with issues of religious diversity.³ These reasons range from practical to ideological. On the practical side, feminist theology must address religious diversity in order to be more relevant and accurate to the diverse world in which we live.⁴ The call to engage religious pluralism is a call to update the feminist theological project to current times of increasing contact with difference. Ideologically, one can see that addressing issues of religious diversity and difference is the application and extension of the feminist “politic of inclusion.”⁵ Furthermore, the intersection with issues of religious pluralism could provide for a fresh construction of central feminist questions.⁶

Following her participation in the roundtable, Gross elaborated on many of these suggestions, framing them in terms of the “ethical” and “epistemological” dimensions of why feminist theology must engage religious pluralism. Feminists can harness the ethical impulse of the movement to critique practices of religious intolerance.⁷ Indeed, the voices of the marginalized are often those of our religiously diverse neighbors. For Gross, this ethical response also provides the epistemological benefits of the “comparative mirror.” She explains that, “by really looking into the comparative mirror, we will undoubtedly find many [religious] alternatives that we would be unlikely to imagine on our own.”⁸ The fruitful exchange among feminist theorists and theologians of diverse religious perspectives could provide for richer understandings of human religiousness and fertile ground for feminist struggles for social justice.

Clearly, feminists are interested in engaging issues of religious diversity, and their reasons are multiple. Through such engagement, the feminist mission of including excluded voices can bring forth insights and resources for rethinking religious issues in ways increasingly accurate to and relevant for our

² Rita M. Gross, “Feminist Theology as Theology of Religions,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 63.

³ “Roundtable Discussion: Feminist Theology and Religious Diversity,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 16, no. 2 (2000): 73–131. Gross’s introduction to the roundtable is titled “Feminist Theology: Religiously Diverse Neighborhood or Christian Ghetto?”

⁴ Rita Gross, “Feminist Theology: Religiously Diverse Neighborhood or Christian Ghetto?” 73.

⁵ C. S’thembele West, “Roundtable Discussion” (see n. 3), 113.

⁶ Judith Simmer-Brown, “Roundtable Discussion” (see n. 3), 110.

⁷ Gross, “Feminist Theology as Theology of Religions,” 64.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

religiously plural world. By engaging the issues of religious pluralism, feminist theology seeks a gain for its own discourse. But what of the benefits to the discourse on religious pluralism? Does a feminist perspective have something unique to add to it too?

Although there are many ways in which feminist thought could intersect and influence the discourse on religious pluralism, here I must narrow my focus and address a specific area. Perhaps feminists interested in other areas of the discourse will find parallel possibilities from the analysis I present. My specific area of interest is in Christian theologies of religious pluralism. In this project the theologian aims to explain how the diversity of religions fits conceptually with the Christian framework of God-Christ-humanity-salvation. In its current construction, the discourse on religious pluralism seems to be in desperate need of fresh insights and alternative ways of thinking in order to keep the conversation moving in new directions. The tired paradigms of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism have been critiqued as often as they have been employed. Even the particularist approach of cultural linguists (e.g., George Lindbeck) is in need of an update. None of these positions seems accurate to the lived encounter with the religious “other” that is often an encounter of both sameness and difference. Perhaps more importantly, none can fully embrace the value of difference while forging solidarity among religious communities. An underlying reason for this rests on the construction of Christian identity employed in the discourse on religious pluralism. It is precisely here that feminist theory might add something revolutionary to that discourse. By rethinking Christian identity as multiple and hybrid, following patterns in feminist thought, we can envision the encounter with *each* “other” in ways that honor differences while forging new solidarities. By examining the paradigms in the current discourse on religious pluralism, we may see more clearly the unique contribution of feminist thought.

A Typology of Paradigms: An Impasse of Sameness or Difference

One way in which theologians have tried to explain the diversity of religious forms is to identify in them an underlying religious sameness. In such a project the theologian minimizes the religious differences in an effort to bring the religions under one overarching system of human relatedness to God; in Christian theological terms this is the relationship of “salvation.” Yet one can see in this approach a self-referential construction of the other, where the person who is different is embraced according to how he or she is similar to oneself. To interpret the diversity of religions through self-referential constructions of otherness eliminates both the distinctiveness of Christian witness, practice, and aim *and* the distinctiveness of the witnesses, practices, and aims

of diverse religious communities. Here, difference is seen as a problem and we are encouraged to retreat to the security of sameness. Unfortunately, the construction of the other based in an underlying sameness can be found in many positions within the discourse on religious pluralism, specifically those identified as exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.

In the exclusivist position, the singular human fulfillment of salvation can be attained only by explicit Christians who profess faith in Jesus Christ. Although this position has fallen out of favor within liberal theological circles, it is held as a live option within the discourse itself. Jerome Gellman, for example, argues a modified version of this position when he defends a believer's claim to full truth in his or her own religion and the falsity of others as they contradict that religion. His claim is that a "contented religious exclusivism"—being satisfied with the full truth of one's own religious tradition to the exclusion of others—is epistemologically defensible.⁹ Such a position, arguing for the singularity of truth, easily translates into the singularity of salvation. The exclusivist position argues for the dismissal of the other's distinctiveness in favor of promoting one's particular view.

The position of inclusivism moves away from the negative vision of other traditions that the exclusivist position tends to take. Maintaining the efficacy of Christ in making salvation available, the inclusivist argues that human fulfillment in salvation can be attained by persons of diverse traditions but is made possible by the unique relationship of Jesus Christ to God. Karl Rahner's articulation of the "anonymous Christian" is the fullest explication of such a singular goal despite the diversity of religious forms. It is also the most transparent construction of sameness. Rahner's is the most explicit search for sameness, but more recent Trinitarian constructions or Spirit Christologies echo his position. The projects of Jacques Dupuis and Gavin D'Costa are just two prominent examples.¹⁰

Just as those Spirit Christologies that follow Rahner's lead are likely candidates for seeking sameness and seeing Christ as the singular norm, so too do many so-called pluralist positions seek sameness. The singularity of humanity's ultimate aim is the root of Rahner's theory of the anonymous Christian; the pluralist, ironically, also suggests a singular aim of human fulfillment, albeit revealed in a diversity of forms. This is seen, for example, in John Hick's pluralist hypothesis, which sees all religions as similar responses to ultimate reality, as witnessed in their similar shifts "from self-centeredness to Reality-cen-

⁹ Jerome Gellman, "In Defence of a Contented Religious Exclusivism," *Religious Studies* 36 (2000): 401–17.

¹⁰ Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997); Gavin D'Costa, "Christ, the Trinity, and Religious Pluralism," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990), 16–29.

teredness.”¹¹ The classic pluralist sees Jesus Christ as moral exemplar and thus allows those of other traditions to show how their religion also promotes the turn from self-centeredness to God-and-other-centeredness. Whereas the inclusivist position is explicitly Christ-centered, the pluralist’s position is often implicitly so, utilizing Jesus Christ as a norm by which to judge the expressions of diverse religions. As S. Mark Heim describes,

In [an] indirect but determinative way, Christianity remains normative as a kind of photographic negative. The shape that Christian faith may take is determined by contemporary standards: the specific content inside the silhouette of Christianity may be washed out and replaced with the content of any other faith. But the boundaries of the image remain set and there is no possibility of religions bringing their own profile to change the outline.¹²

Pluralists either first recognize the shift from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness in the Christ figure and argue from there a similar turn in the diversity of religions, or first assume the validity of Christianity and the efficacy of Christ before turning to afford this to other religions.

Although contemporary writings often stress the distinctiveness of each of these theological approaches, one can see that all positions in the tripartite typology of exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism fall prey to a self-referential construction of the diverse religious forms. The “other” is not allowed to be distinctive but rather is judged by how much “like” the Christian’s his or her religious practice and achievements are. The inclusive stance of the anonymous Christian is problematic in that the “other” is judged on the basis of Christian characteristics and thus is unavoidably seen as deficient in comparison to explicit Christians;¹³ the pluralist stance, similarly, cannot account for the distinctiveness of diverse traditions as a positive characteristic. In the pluralist construction, the non-Christian is not an anonymous member of the Christian community; rather, the distinctiveness of any given community is dissolved under the now universalized qualities of singular human fulfillment.

Although many discussions of religious pluralism include only these three positions, there are also present in the discourse alternatives to the search for sameness. These alternatives are theological projects that understand religions as indissolubly distinct entities that thoroughly shape adherents to radically dif-

¹¹ John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 107.

¹² S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995), 110.

¹³ For recognizing this process of judging the other as a deficient model of oneself, I am indebted to Lynda Lange’s article “Burnt Offerings to Rationality: A Feminist Reading of the Construction of Indigenous Peoples in Enrique Dussel’s Theory of Modernity,” *Hypatia* 13, no. 3 (1998): 132–45.

ferent understandings of the world, reality, and ultimate reality. George Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic construction of religious difference, for example, identifies religions as frameworks that shape human experience and understanding in radically distinct ways.¹⁴ Lindbeck identifies the sacred scriptures of diverse traditions as thoroughly shaping adherents' worldviews through a process of intratextuality. Being thoroughly shaped by the language of one's own sacred scriptures, one cannot truly understand those of another religion except in the case of having acquired a "rare bilingualism."¹⁵ In this construction the distinctiveness of diverse traditions is safeguarded, but, because of the incommensurability of frameworks, one is not in a position to address and understand persons of different religious communities. The theologies of Heim and Joseph DiNoia follow this pattern of emphasizing the incommensurability of our religious differences.¹⁶

As investigation into the diverse theological responses to religious pluralism can show, Christian theologians tend to employ strategies of seeking sameness or defending differences. What is notable in placing these two options in close conversation is the recognition that the positions of sameness and difference both function to distance otherness. In the defense of differences, the idea of incommensurability often renders distinct religious traditions impenetrable to those outside in all but the rarest of cases. The otherness of the other is held at a distance. And, although the search for sameness seems to embrace the other, the otherness of the other is actually rejected. Neither approach can serve as the foundation for real encounter between persons of different religious traditions. In one approach, difference is erased and we are encouraged to retreat to the security of sameness. In the other, difference is held at such a distance that the impact of the other can hardly be felt. The search for sameness constructs religious identities at the expense of real differences, whereas the defense of difference often compromises the possibility for connections across religions. The contemporary theological discourse on religious pluralism stands at an impasse of sameness or difference.¹⁷

¹⁴ See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

¹⁵ George Lindbeck, "The Gospel's Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability," *Modern Theology* 13, no. 4 (October 1997), 427.

¹⁶ Heim, *Salvations*; Joseph DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1992).

¹⁷ The construction of the discourse as standing at an impasse of sameness or difference is based on my study of contemporary theologies of religious pluralism ("Ultimacy and Identity: Karl Rahner and George Lindbeck on Religious Pluralism" [Th.D. diss., Harvard Divinity School, 2001]) and specifically considers those projects which aim to provide a Christian systematic theology. As such, the designation of "pluralist" versus "particularist" is an important distinction between the two positions. In her "Feminist Theology as Theology of Religions," Rita Gross combines these two options to describe the pluralist position, writing, "Each religion provides something valuable and interesting in a giant mosaic" (65). Although the mosaic is an interesting metaphor for considering the

The Logic of Identity in Theologies of Religious Pluralism

Though the multiple positions of exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and particularism present distinct approaches for understanding religious difference in the world, each leaves the categories of religious traditions intact as an undisputed fact. From among the many ways of being human in the world, the categories "Hindu," "Christian," "Jewish," "Buddhist," "Muslim," and "indigenous/tribal" emerge as identifiable collectivities each of which is defined by a unique set of features shared among the members of the group. The collectivity of persons who share these features makes up a given "religion." Religions are complex wholes of belief, symbol, and practice that shape an adherent's way of life and experience of reality. Religions are seen as communal ways of being in the world marked by certain identifiable characteristics shared among members in distinction from non-members.

The arrangement of persons into these categories manufactures "more manageable, transparent populations" as the basis for theological assessment.¹⁸ This process of categorization is defended as a practical necessity: in order to discuss different religions, particularities are subsumed under a limited set of distinctions. But this categorization classifies persons on the basis of a singular identity feature. In order to define Christian identity vis-à-vis other religious identities, one must isolate that feature which will constitute membership in the category "Christian." Tautologically, a Christian is anyone who exhibits that characteristic feature of the category "Christian." Logically, then, there must be a "Christian" element that serves as the defining feature of Christian identity. The subsequent construction of diverse religious communities is based on the same presupposition. The fundamentally defining feature of each community serves to bind persons to those within their religious category and simultaneously to exclude otherness. The imagined sameness within a communal category sharpens the differences between the various ways of being in the world, such that theologians can describe "the Muslim perspective" or "Jewish practice."

The categorization of "the religions" serves as a means to conceptually control an otherwise overwhelmingly complex reality of religious differences. We see how categories control the "other" by forming manageable populations, but this categorization can succeed only by having similarly controlled the "otherness within." Iris Marion Young would describe this as following a "logic

diversity of religions, Gross's description overlooks the fact that the classic pluralist positions in Christian theology (notably those of John Hick [*A Christian Theology of Religions*] and Paul Knitter [*One Earth Many Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995)]) embrace the distinctiveness of the diversity of religions as manifestations of an underlying sameness to religiosity.

¹⁸ Russell T. McCutcheon, "The Imperial Dynamic in the Study of Religion: Neocolonial Practices in an American Discipline," in *Postcolonial America*, ed. C. Richard King (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 298.

of identity,” whereby persons are bound together in their religious identity and set apart from those whose religious identity is different. A logic of identity proceeds by drawing category distinctions to identify what is “in” or “out” of the totality. Young describes the problematics that emerge as a result: “Any move to define an identity, a closed totality, always depends on excluding some elements, separating the pure from the impure. Bringing particular things under a universal essence, for example, depends on determining some attribute of particulars as accidental, lying outside the essence. Any definition or category creates an inside/outside distinction, and the logic of identity seeks to keep those borders firmly drawn.”¹⁹ Young’s contention is that the logic of identity, in seeking a unity, dissolves differences as incidental and irrelevant to the sameness identifiable among members of a category. In the process, the logic of identity erases specific features of members’ identities. Furthermore, the categorization masks an outcome that privileges certain forms of religious expression and eliminates intrareligious diversity. In favor of collective description, the structure of the discourse eliminates the diversity of locations inhabited by differences of gender, economics, education, race, and a multiplicity of additional fundamentally defining features. Subsuming particularities in proffering collectivity marginalizes and even erases the expressions of the powerless within the discourse. When Christian theologians argue for a similarity among Christians that distinguishes them from non-Christians, it is at the expense of the diversity one might find within Christianity itself. This erasure of particularity within the collective is the first outcome of employing a logic of identity. A second and simultaneous outcome is the distancing of otherness. By creating a collective identity to be shared by those within the category, in distinction from those outside the category, the logic of identity forges intrareligious solidarity through the process of distancing otherness.

In theologies of religious pluralism, the various features of one’s identity and location are incidental to one’s being part of the category “Christian,” and they subsequently fall away in the discourse. In this construction, one’s “Christianity” is an element that can be carved out from the other dimensions of who one is, and it serves to define the collectivity “Christian.” The “Christian” aspect of one’s identity can be isolated, and, dismissing all other features, all who share a “Christian” identity can be grouped together. Bound together with other “like Christians,” persons have few imaginative resources for relating to persons in other bounded categories. We can theorize a sameness among the categories and thus communicate on the basis of that sameness; or we can insist on the radical differences between the bounded categories and relinquish the naive hope of understanding across difference. With only one identity feature available for the encounter, the options are either sameness or difference.

¹⁹ Iris Marion Young, “The Ideal Community and the Politics of Difference,” in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 303.

The major problematic, then, of the current configuration of the discourse on religious pluralism stems from the conceptualization of “the religions” as bounded wholes. This boundedness gives way to an understanding of a person’s religious identity as either fitting or not fitting within a given category. In our minds we conjure up the idea that all “Hindus” or “Muslims” or “Christians” share the same perspectives and understandings with other members of their respective religious communities. Or at least, “they” (persons within a given religious community) will share among themselves more salient features than they might share with those of “us” outside that religious community. Setting up “religions” in this way, as homogeneous entities with identifiable characteristics shared among persons within its boundaries, the project of comparison takes place on a theoretical level, where “the religions” are compared one to another.

Despite their best efforts to maintain the lived complexity of religious diversity, theologians within the discourse rely on such conceptual categories that distinguish “the religions” from one another. Take, for example, John Hick’s classic articulation of the pluralistic hypothesis, in which he encourages the reader to see “the religions” as diverse responses to ultimate reality, or “the Real.” In drawing out the implications of this vision, Hick writes,

Each tradition will continue in its concrete particularity as its own unique response to the Real. As the sense of rivalry between them diminishes and they participate in inter-faith dialogue they will increasingly affect one another and each is likely to undergo change as a result, both influencing and being influenced by the others. But nevertheless within this growing interaction each will remain basically itself. In this respect, the pluralistic hypothesis makes comparatively little difference to the existing traditions. But in another respect it makes what is for some of them a major difference. For in coming to understand itself as one among several different valid human responses to the Real each will gradually de-emphasize that aspect of its teaching which entails its own unique superiority.²⁰

Whether or not we agree with Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis and the challenges it holds for religious claims, what is striking is the manner in which Hick hypostatizes “the traditions,” construing these conceptual entities as real existents and subjects in their own right. Not only have the collectives of “the religious traditions” been produced and set alongside one another for comparison, they are now acting as individual subjects: each tradition *participates in dialogue yet remains itself, coming to understand itself in a new way*. The traditions take on the characteristics of discrete subjects—dialoguing, reflecting, thinking, and acting. Each of the diverse “religions” functions as not only a collectivity but a collectivity with agency and subjectivity.

²⁰ Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 30.

In a recent work, S. Mark Heim argues against the pluralist diminishment of religious particularity, yet he similarly employs “the religions” as collective entities. In this case, the diverse religions do not shape persons toward the same ultimate end; rather, they are collectivities through which persons arrive at distinct ultimate aims. Despite the difference between this understanding and Hick’s, Heim similarly relies on the collective categorization of “the religions,” constructing his discussion of diverse religious ends by referring to “the Christian account” and “the Buddhist account” of how these ends should be envisaged, as well as by collectivizing the traditions in “Buddhist practices” or “Christian expectations.”²¹ Although this is an alternative vision, Heim still employs conceptual categories of “the religions” as discrete wholes that can be set one against another for comparison.

Examples of the way in which “the religions” are taken as homogeneous wholes proliferate within the discourse on religious pluralism. As theologians and thinkers discuss religious diversity, differences among members of any particular tradition are minimized in order to outline the differences between the different traditions. Intrareligious diversity is minimized in order to present interreligious diversity in more stark relief. The grouping of persons into the various categories of “the religions” and the assumptions made on the basis of those groupings too easily erase the diversity and difference within any one community.

Perhaps one reason feminists have been largely absent from the discourse on religious pluralism is that they don’t see *themselves* portrayed in the collective. Defining the collective identity, theologians and thinkers in the discourse selectively articulate what will count as Christian identity, silencing the diversity of actual Christian understandings of individual identities. Yet the homogenization of the category of each religion not only falls short in its representation of the actual lived diversity within that community, it also obscures a possible key to reenvisioning connections across difference. It is here that a feminist perspective can offer resources for thinking our way forward. With feminist patterns of thinking, we might reenvision the categories of the religions as each encompassing a wide diversity of forms and expressions so that in intrareligious diversity we might find resources for rethinking interreligious solidarities.

Feminist Constructions of Identity as Multiple and Hybrid

As I will elaborate, one fundamental insight of feminist theory has been that identities are not constructed on a singular feature (e.g., gender or religion) but that persons are located in multiple spaces and that these aspects of

²¹ S. Mark Heim, “Saving the Particulars: Religious Experience and Religious Ends,” *Religious Studies* 36 (2000): 435–53.

identity are mutually informing.²² In North America this recognition was first brought to the surface when women of color argued that their experience of “being a woman” was not shared with white feminists because of the way race impacts gender construction and experience. Feminists deepened this insight with the recognition that *every* experience is informed by various dimensions of an individual’s social location. The identity of being a woman is intersected by race, class, education, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and other factors. This insight has implications for the construction of religious identity as well. Each element of identity and past experience combines with others in my own person and shapes my understanding and experience of Christian identity. Rethinking Christian identity using the resources of feminist thought, we find ways to embrace hybridity and forge new solidarities.

What does it mean to say, “I am Christian”? Theologians like George Lindbeck would claim that this means my understanding of the world has been thoroughly and uniquely shaped by my association with a particular church or with the Christian story.²³ Karl Rahner would see this declaration as providing a countercultural force binding together all who confess it.²⁴ At the very least, theologians would like to claim that being Christian or being grouped in the religious category “Christian” means that one’s religious identity, if not one’s entire self-understanding, has been informed by this community alone. In the discourse on religious pluralism, the category “Christian” might be visualized as the community of all those who declare, “I am a Christian,” and this declaration resounds in a global and univocal voice distinct from the declaration of other religious groupings. This distinction among traditions is of central importance in the theological project. Yet the imaginative echo of a universal declaration of Christian identity ignores the dissonant ways actual Christians understand the claim they are making. If it were the case that all Christian identities were formed out of the selfsame religious understanding, would there not be greater agreement among Christians themselves? Why do we find ourselves in disagreement with the claims of others within our own religious category? Is it that the message of our shared religion is so obscure that it can be interpreted in many different ways? Or do these disagreements arise from a human inability to see clearly the “truth” or “meaning” of our shared religious tradition?

²² See Kwok Pui-lan, “Feminist Theology as Intercultural Discourse,” in Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 31–32.

²³ See George Lindbeck, “The Future of Dialogue: Pluralism or an Eventual Synthesis of Doctrine?” in *Christian Action, and Openness to the World*, ed. Joseph Papin (Villanova, Pa.: Villanova University Press, 1970), 45–46.

²⁴ See Karl Rahner, “Ecumenical Togetherness Today,” trans. Joseph Donceel, in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 22, *Humane Society and the Church of Tomorrow* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 93; and “Ecumenical Theology in the Future,” trans. David Bourke, in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14 (New York: Seabury, 1976), 255–56.

Our experience tells us that there exists intrareligious diversity within our own “Christian” category. We recognize differences of interpretation, of aim, of witness, and of practice. We can’t help but see the distinction in the claim “I am a Christian” as it is articulated by a peasant worker and by a multi-million-dollar capitalist. “I am a Christian” means something different to opposing sides in the debate over women’s ordination and has distinct meanings from the perspectives of fundamentalists and feminists. When theologians and thinkers erase these distinctions in order to present Christian identity as distinct from other religious identities, they separate “Christianness” from the other dimensions of each Christian’s identity and experience. Yet questions remain: Should we even think of our religious identities as isolable? Can our religious understandings ever be wholly separated from the other dimensions of our experience and existence? Or is it more accurate to recognize that our religious identities are always impacted by our social, political, gendered, and sexual identities as well?

Although scholars of religion would group me in the category “Christian” and I myself might identify with that community, it would be difficult to substantiate the claim that my understanding of the world and the shape of my experience within that world are singularly informed by that community. In regard to any given experience or understanding of the world, it is not always possible to identify which feature or features of my identity—Christian, North American, college-educated, feminist, married, Midwestern, professorial, familial, or other—are informing my interpretation of that experience or understanding. For example, a student comes to me to explain the difficulties of her transition to college, and I respond with (what I hope is) an open ear and suggest strategies for coping. Does my response to this student grow out of my Christian understanding? Is it the application of my feminist concerns? Is my response rooted in my experience in a large family with a caring network of support? Or do I mold this encounter by drawing on my pedagogical aims and training in higher education? Perhaps I am responding to this student as I have learned to respond from listening to my husband counsel countless students in high school. As this and an endless list of other examples will show, many of the elements of my identity and past experience combine in my one person and inform the response I will formulate. As Jean Grimshaw reflects from a feminist perspective, “Experience does not come neatly in segments, such that it is always possible to abstract what in one’s experience is due to ‘being a woman’ from that which is due to ‘being married,’ ‘being middle class’ and so forth.”²⁵ Grimshaw alerts us to the natural combination of distinct features into our one self. Identity categories are not separable such that it might be possible to isolate that slice of identity which informs a given experience.

²⁵ Jean Grimshaw, *Philosophy and Feminist Thinking* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 85.

The dynamic intersection of identity categories helps us to understand the internal diversity of any given religious tradition. When aspects of identity are forged into a singular individual in such a way that they cannot easily be compartmentalized, one cannot ask what it means to be a Christian without recognizing that the answer is also conditioned by other identity categories. This insight too is provided by feminist theory on the construction of identity. For example, Elizabeth Spelman points out that compartmentalization, although a tempting strategy, does not do justice to the lived experience that our identity features are mutually informing. As Spelman describes it, if identity categories were separable, the multiple factors of our identity would not impact one another and our social location would not matter: "If my 'womanness' is separable, then I as a woman would still be the same woman I am, even if I happen to have been born into a body of a different color, or even a body of the same color at a different moment in history."²⁶ But it is precisely the inseparability of our identity features that raised the critical recognition of diversity within the feminist movement when women of color uncovered the biases of white women who were unaware that many women's experience was forged out of a "convergence of racism, sexism and classism."²⁷ The womanist trajectory of feminist thought illuminates the way in which our identity features mutually inform one another. One cannot express the experience of "being a woman" while ignoring the ways in which that experience is informed also by other dimensions of one's identity and the social construction of our world. So too with Christian identities. If we could truly isolate "Christianness" as thinkers do in order to group all "Christians" in a singular category, then I would still be the same Christian I am, even if I happened to have been born into a body of a different color, in a different location, and/or in another cultural context.

But if I were born today into the body of a female among the Christian minority in Korea, my experience of "being a Christian" would, I suspect, be different. My claim of Christian identity might stand in solidarity with the identities of my fellow women struggling for human wholeness in a patriarchal context and might also stand in solidarity with women and men resisting neo-colonialist practices and the dehumanization of poverty. These men and women with whom I might share my cultural or ideological identity may or may not be Christian, given that the population of Christians in Asia numbers only about 3 percent. In this context I might understand my Christian identity to be one among many resources for envisioning the wholeness of my cultural

²⁶ Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon, 1988), 137.

²⁷ Jacqueline Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, Academy Series, no. 64 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989), 198. See also bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: South End, 2000); and Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing, 1984).

community. Like Chung Hyun Kyung, I might reenvision Christ as a shamanic healer at the intersection of Christian and indigenous religious forms, identifying Christ in this way so as to offer a remedy for the healing of brokenness in a postcolonial Asia struggling against poverty, imperialism, and sexism.²⁸ My Christian identity and my understanding of Christ would be shaped by the other dimensions of my social condition.

The particularity of each Christian reminds us of the internal diversity within any given category. Using the resources of feminist theory, we can challenge the logic of identity and recognize that the category of any religion is made up of diverse identities. Each of these identities is constructed out of the intersection of multiple fundamentally defining features—religion, race, class, gender, nationality, ethnicity, profession, sexual orientation, and so forth. Our religious identities are not *sui generis* and unaffected by other dimensions of who we are; rather, our very understanding of the religious dimension of our identity is informed by the diverse features of our location and experience. There is no “Christian” identity, only Christian identities impacted by race, gender, class, ethnicity, profession, and so on. In contrast to the discourse’s tendency to designate individual identities resting in a singular feature (e.g., “Christianness” or “Buddhist identity”) and to subordinate all other aspects of identity to this religious dimension, feminist thought emerging from women’s experience suggests that each individual has multiple and mutually informing aspects of identity. One’s religious identity is not isolable as “Christian” only, but one’s “Christianness” and the experience of “being Christian” are informed by the myriad fundamentally defining features. Thus, each of us is formed by a web of identity. As Morwenna Griffiths describes, the self is “intricate, entangled and interlaced, with each part connected to other parts.”²⁹ Seeing each individual identity as web, we can no longer afford a simple designation of “Christian,” “Muslim,” or “Jew.” Instead, each category itself is made up of a collective diversity wherein each individual is a *particular* Christian, a *particular* Muslim, or a *particular* Hindu, with identity features irreducible to the collective.

The hybrid identity of each member produces not a homogeneous “religion” but a category of infinite internal diversity. The category “Christian” is internally differentiated as each individual brings to the collective a diversity that renders the category neither stable nor homogeneous. If other features of one’s identity inform one’s “Christianness,” then the category “Christian” is itself made up of multiplicity and fragmentation. Griffiths describes the result of such a recognition:

²⁸ See Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990).

²⁹ Morwenna Griffiths, *Feminisms and the Self: The Web of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1995), 2.

The acceptance of fragmentation is the relinquishing of an inappropriate dream of purity, as well as a relinquishing of the wish for the unity of the subject. . . . Indeed, the problem of fragmentation takes on an entirely new look when it is recognized that most people will not identify 100 percent with any group in which they find themselves. We are all hybrids. A group need not strive after purity. To do so is to force its members into making a more than 100 percent identification, a condition in which much of their experience and interests are stifled.³⁰

If my experience of being Christian is also informed by other dimensions of my identity, then I will not identify 100 percent with the categorical grouping “Christianity.” My understanding of what it means to be Christian is informed by the other dimensions of my identity. No matter how the religious collective is defined by the scholar or the theologian, some part of my understanding will not align with his or her description. Yet accepting this fragmentation of the categorical association and “relinquishing” the “inappropriate dream of purity” need not be mourned as the loss of cohesion or communal agreement. In fact, the diversity within any given community allows for hybrid identities that can foster connections outside that particular grouping. This is possible because each strand of the web of identity has been formed relationally through engagement in other communities. Although I have been shaped, in part, by my affiliation with a religious community, my identity has also been fostered in conversation with other communities—the community of my family, my profession, my generation, my nationality, my gender. The hybridity of my identity means that although I do not identify completely with any one given category or community, I partially identify with many. The idea of hybrid identities and incomplete identification *within* a category can be embraced as the potential for Christians to forge solidarities *outside* the Christian community. As Martha Minow suggests, “No one identity category, sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, class, family status captures [an individual’s] whole world. These very differences afford chances for connection.”³¹ If every member does not identify 100 percent with the categorical group “Christian,” then a certain percentage of *each* member identifies with a different categorical grouping or groupings. The Christian, then, is at home in community with other Christians, but the multiple facets of his or her identity and the web of identity itself allow him or her to forge innumerable solidarities by virtue of association in multiple communities. It is our internal diversity as a Christian community that affords an infinite number of possible sites for forging solidarities beyond our given religious category.

³⁰ Ibid., 182.

³¹ Martha Minow, *Not Only for Myself: Identity, Politics, and the Law* (New York: New Press, 1997), 40.

Enacting Solidarity through Hybrid Identities

Simultaneous membership in many groups allows for solidarities to be enacted between groups otherwise constructed disparately. Just a few examples of how this can occur may help to explain why envisioning categories of internal diversity is an important shift for the discourse on religious pluralism. Whereas constructing religious categories on a singular criterion makes available only one identity feature on which to make a connection (assessing the other's religious identity on the basis of either sameness or difference), constructing religions as communities of internal diversity allows for the partial identification of overlapping identities where a variety of identity features hold the potential for making connections.

We see the enactment of collaborative solidarity across the boundaries of the religious traditions in the early texts of feminist theology. These collaborations do not begin from an assumed sameness among the diverse religions, nor do they insist on the incommensurable differences between them. Rather, drawing on the multiple aspects of their identities, religious feminists collaborated precisely on a hybrid religious identity; each was simultaneously a member of a religious tradition and a feminist. In the early collaborative texts of feminist theology, thinkers identified patterns in feminist spirituality that transgressed the boundaries of religious traditions. The creative exchange of methodologies and the shared struggle for gender equality encouraged solidarity among feminists despite their being affiliated with distinct religious communities. It was precisely the internal diversity and hybrid identities of religious feminists that forged the solidarity of feminist collaborations such as *Womanspirit Rising*, *Weaving the Visions*, and *After Patriarchy*.³² In these projects religious differences were not dissolved, nor were persons distanced as the result of particularity; rather, solidarity was forged *in* particularity. The association with other feminists of diverse traditions informed each individual's own understanding of the religious community in which she was based. As Carol Christ recalls, "I vividly remember the days when the women and religion section was a place where feminists in religion engaged in dialogue across religious boundaries. I believed that we were working together to transform and recreate religious traditions."³³ In these projects and others, we can see the potential for solidarity by virtue of the multiplicity in our religious identities.

To extend the example of solidarity arising from hybrid identities, we might envision other acts of resistance to social injustice in lived collaborations.

³² Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979); Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, eds., *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1989); Paula M. Cooley, William R. Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel, eds., *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991).

³³ Carol P. Christ, "Roundtable Discussion" (see n. 3), 79.

For example, a group from a Christian church might live out their commitment to Jesus' life practice by participating in the struggles of immigrant families new to the area. Their strength in doing so arises from their internal multiplicity as they provide legal referrals, companionship, health-care information, and conversation partners for language practice. The feminist-Christian who participates in the effort does so to live out her feminist *and* her Christian concerns. Yet she might find that a Muslim colleague wishes to join the effort out of his own commitment to social justice, and a Buddhist neighbor out of empathy for the plight of the refugee. The participation of Muslim colleagues and Buddhist neighbors in this project might, in turn, open up the opportunity for involvement to a wider segment of their respective religious communities. Overlapping concerns can spread wider the net of solidarity. Yet while we work alongside our neighbors of other faiths, the distinctiveness of their religious perspectives is not erased and we do not communicate on some newly found sameness within our religions. Rather, as members of multiple communities simultaneously, we possess a multilingualism through which we might find a shared language. In conversations about the struggles of the marginalized (or even discussions about work or neighborhood concerns), we might be introduced to ideas specific to another's religious tradition. Here we might envision Gross's "comparative mirror" enacted in the world, whereby we can genuinely find "alternatives that we would be unlikely to imagine on our own."³⁴ Collaborative efforts can bring to the surface the resource of differences that hybrid identities provide, for as members of diverse communities come together in a shared project, the differences they bring can offer unique resources for that project. Thus, in forming the net of solidarity, it is not only elements of overlapping identity that are valued for providing sites of connection, but also elements of difference that offer new ways of understanding the common task. In connections across hybrid identities, we are able to value the very otherness of the other.

Hybrid identities also construct religious communities in a new way, in comparison with the bounded wholes created by the logic of identity. In past constructions, an individual is located in one particular religious category and is conceptualized apart from other religious categories or communities. But in the construction of hybrid identities, the hybridity can include a multiplicity of religious identities as well. Throughout history we see evidence of this as persons locate spaces within multiple religious communities. Rather than perceiv-

³⁴ See n. 8. In valuing the otherness that we encounter in the "comparative mirror," it is important to avoid replicating colonialist encounters in which otherness is valued primarily for how it can serve one's own aims. In each encounter we must be keenly aware of the power differentials that structure the gaze across the comparative mirror, placing in primacy the goals of justice. See Kwok Pui-lan, introduction to *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse*, ed. Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan (New York: Routledge, 2002), 26–28.

ing a deep gulf between “Jewish” and “Buddhist,” we can identify “Buddhist-Jews” being shaped by and participating in both communities.³⁵ Looking at the Christian community through the lens of hybridity, we can also recognize theologians shaped by the multiple traditions of Hinduism and Christianity.³⁶ I have friends who recognize Confucian elements in their practice of Christianity, and I have heard of Vietnamese American Catholics who maintain a Buddhist shrine in their homes. A colleague from Nigeria describes how his Christian uncle often turns in times of crisis to African traditional religion so that he might connect with the spiritual realm alive in Africa. Many of these examples reflect the way “hybridity” is used in postcolonial thought as a term for the consciousness that emerges in contexts of intersecting cultures.³⁷ In these locations, the meeting of cultures has also been a meeting of religions, with the result that the hybrid stands as a figure of double consciousness, sharing identity features with multiple religious communities. As a result of colonial encounters, such double belonging is evident all around our interconnected globe, both today and throughout history.³⁸ The concept of hybridity embraced by feminist and postcolonial theory allows us to challenge the logic of singular belonging that creates divisions among religious traditions. And it is by challenging the discourses that divide us that we creatively envision even closer communities of solidarity.

Conclusion: The Contribution of Feminist Thought to the Discourse on Religious Pluralism

Conceiving religious traditions as internally diverse through hybrid identities allows us to envision connections that transcend the insider/outsider distinction current in constructions of religious pluralism. In the examples I have given, hybrid identities allow for nets of solidarity to be stretched out across diverse groups to attend to projects of social justice. But the concept of hybrid identities does not offer an automatic solution for the injustice and inequality of our world. Hybridity functions as a conceptual tool that encourages connec-

³⁵ For example, Kwok describes Gross's work thus: “As a Jew, she has written on female God language and Judaism; as a Buddhist, she has written about women's roles in Buddhism and proposed a feminist reconstruction of the Buddhist tradition” (ibid, 24).

³⁶ See, for example, Raimon Panikkar, who is the author of several major texts at the intersection of Christianity and Hinduism, including his seminal work *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Toward an Ecumenical Christophany* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964). For a discussion of his shaping by multiple traditions, see his “Religious Identity and Pluralism,” in *Dome of Many Colors: Studies in Religious Pluralism, Identity, and Unity*, ed. Arvind Sharma and Kathleen M. Dugan (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International), 23–47.

³⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

³⁸ See, for example, Catherine Cornille, ed., *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002).

tions across religious and non-religious communities, but these connections will be applied to concerns of injustice only by living persons enacting such solidarity in the world. Moreover, the idea of interreligious solidarity as the connections of hybrid identities can foster such practices in a way other paradigms in the discourse on religious pluralism cannot, for the essential framework of hybrid identities I have envisioned is that of communities created through solidarity in diversity, where both sameness and difference are valued. As we have seen, none of the options within the discourse on religious pluralism (exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, or particularism) equally values both sameness and difference. The positions of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism tend to erase distinctiveness in favor of an underlying sameness. The value of difference, the gift of the comparative mirror, is not allowed to flourish. And although the particularist position insists on the differences among religious communities, the presentation of these differences as being incommensurable and as thoroughly shaping adherents does not leave room for the communication necessary in shared struggles. With the concept that hybrid identities forge nets of interreligious solidarity, we can see that connections across difference might be created without erasing the distinctiveness of religious communities in the process.

If we take a liberationist perspective on the role of religious communities in promoting justice, hybrid identities allow for nets of solidarity to be cast across communities of religious difference. From a Christian perspective, this struggle for human wholeness and a world of justice is a practice that restores humanity to its intended relationship to God and others, as patterned on the life of Jesus Christ. In the categories of systematic theology, it is part and parcel of the fulfillment that is salvation. Thus, whereas exclusivists, inclusivists, and pluralists envision a singularity to salvation that conforms to a singular model of human fulfillment in Jesus Christ, and the particularist envisions a multiplicity of ultimate ends that are mutually exclusive, the adherent of hybrid identities suggests that diverse religious traditions bring to the struggle of "salvation" a multiplicity of ways to foster fully human lives in relationships of wholeness. We pattern our lives in distinct ways while sharing struggles for wholeness in the face of the mystery of our existence that Christians name God. Our religious diversity affords tools for enacting new ways of being in the world and new insights into the mystery.

Feminists of the twenty-first century have recognized the need to engage more fully the issues of interreligious dialogue and cooperation, but the wider discourse on religious pluralism has not yet recognized the unique contribution that feminist constructions of identity and solidarity might provide. Feminist projects of embracing hybridity and multiple identities as resources for solidarity demonstrate new ways of being in the world, ways not defined by the boundaries of our religious traditions or the categories of the academy. In

destabilizing the categories in the discourse on religious pluralism, we see precisely what feminist theory and theology has to offer to the discussion. Bounded categories of single-identity religious traditions create an impasse of sameness and difference. In shifting identity from the solid entity of a singular religious category to the dynamic intersection of hybridity, we recognize the internal diversity of every category and see communal membership in fluid, partial identifications. This shift allows us to envision interreligious solidarities in multiple, changing, and ever new ways. Recognizing the hybridity that values both sameness and difference, feminist thought presents a new avenue for social action that might bring forth new theological insights as well.