

ALL ROADS LEAD TO ROME?

**– Dignity in Diversity in Religions –
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C. S. Song

The Distinguished Professor of Theology and Asian Cultures
Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, California

Core Doctoral Faculty

The Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California

What is religion? Let's begin with this basic question. Religion is not so much a matter of doctrine as a matter of life. It has to do more with life than with doctrine. It engages men and women in many activities of life such as health and medicine, for example, including religious activities. These activities, religious or not, are basically aimed at saving people *from* physical, mental and spiritual afflictions and empowering them *for* their physical, mental and spiritual well-being.

If "saving people at one level or another," if salvation is healing and healing is salvation, is the heart of most religions, there should be a fundamental accord among them and basic respect for one another. But this is not the case. The history of religions is filled with tension, conflict and strife among different religions and within the same religion. How is this historical fact to be explained? What causes religions to be divided and to foster hostility among them? The reason is not difficult to find. Religions develop doctrines and teachings exclusive of each other, especially in relation to salvation, that lead to the restrictive concepts of God, savior, and community.

At this level the saying that "all roads lead to Rome" does not apply and it will not apply. How am I to know that your God is the same as my God? How am I to assert that the path to salvation defined in my religion is the same path defined in your religion? How am I to claim that my savior is your savior and your savior is my savior? To assert that religions all lead to the same God, to the same savior, even though the paths to get there are different, is, in my view, mistaken. There are similarities as well as differences, and there are differences as well as similarities. Whether similarities or differences, they are basically related to the question of how we conceive of salvation, God, or savior. As to whether salvation, God, or savior, is salvation itself, God in God's own self, or savior himself or herself, is a different question. The assertion that what people of different religions

believe and do lead to the same goal is a false assertion. None of us is God. None of us is savior. And none of us has the complete experience of salvation as eternal life distinct from our well-being in our temporary life.

Does it mean that not all religious paths lead to the same destination? Does it lead us to conclude that religions are fated to pursue separate ways? Are religions like track and field runners competing with each other, outdoing each other, trying to get to the finish ahead of the others? This does not seem the right alternative either. It is precisely this competitive way and this combative spirit that leads to an exclusive attitude towards others, giving rise to conflicts in the same religion and fostering misgivings among people of different faiths. We seem to be in an impasse here. Are we then condemned to live in a religiously divided world? Are we destined to carry our misunderstanding about how others live and what others believe all the way to the presence of God? Is there no dignity to a religion because of the diversity of religions?

These are important questions. They force us to ask whether what matters in religion is the life we live or the doctrine of God we uphold. The questions also oblige us to direct our concerns of how we human beings can be related to each other despite our cultural and religious diversities, and of how ethical demands are crucial in our relation to God. Perhaps it is in the realities of the life we live, no matter what religion each of us practice, that we are more likely to find many, if not all, roads leading to Rome, that human and ethical concerns of religions leading people of diverse religious backgrounds to mutual understanding, cooperation and enrichment. Whether this is the case is what we should explore at this Congress with its theme, “Dignity in Diversity”.

Not “Pars Pro Toto”

Let us ask again the question with which we started. Do religions, although pursuing diverse paths, lead to the same goal? Or do the diverse paths religions pursue lead to diverse goals?

The critical word here is “diverse.” We often commit a fundamental error of holding people with “diverse” religious views and practices to be different from, and even opposite to us. What is our error? It is the error of “*pars pro toto*,” insisting that a part each holds to be true *is* the whole truth, that what is partial *is* what is total. A part may be a part of the whole, but it is not the whole. This is an error of “taking the part for the whole” (*yi p’ien kai ch’uan* in Chinese). This is an error routinely committed by many believers of different religions and faiths, especially by those with evangelical zeal, those who believe their mission is to convert others to their faith.

I am not saying that it is entirely wrong to apply the popular saying, “all roads lead to Rome,” to religions. The saying has to be applied judiciously, distinguishing different levels of application. That is to say, the saying, when applied to diverse religions, can be valid at certain levels but not at other levels. To me this is how dignity of one religion is safeguarded in the world of diversity of religions.

What is Religion?

Here we are led to the most basic question that has been seldom asked by religious believers and teachers. Teachers of religion do not ask it because they consider it to be a question for philosophers. Believers do not ask it because they claim what they hold and practice is the true religion and are not inclined to bother themselves with the question of what religion is.

Implied in this assumption is already an implicit view of religion: religion is the truth they hold and the practice they do. In other words, what they hold and practice to be true is the true religion. As to what believers of other religions hold and practice is not true at all. In this way, what one community of believers hold and practice as truth becomes the criteria by which other religions are judged to be true or false. And of course the religion judged to be false is either dismissed or held in check.

What is, then, religion? In Asia and here in Taiwan what is “religious” is closely related to all aspects of human life, so closely that to be religious is a way of life. From public religious worship service to private religious devotion, from religious festivals to birth, wedding, and death, from invocation of the divine spirit to the veneration of ancestral spirits, from religious sacrifices to dedication of a new house - human life is what it is because it is religious. As a matter of fact, this was the case for our ancestors in ancient times regardless of cultural, ethnic or even geographical differences.

In the West, as civilization has developed, religion is reduced more and more to a limited sector of life and society. This has not happened in the East. In the East civilization has not stood still. It has grown and developed, though not quite in the same way as in the West. But religion has remained a vital part of life. As a matter of fact, religion continues to affect almost all aspects of people’s lives. In the world outside the West, to live is to be religious and to be religious is to live. Note that the adjective “religious” is used here instead of the noun “religion.” To be religious is not primarily to subscribe to a set of teachings and doctrines, but to live a life in awareness of the presence of the spirit-world and to make efforts to fulfill ethical expectations of the religious community to which one belongs.

Religion, then, is a way of life. This, on the whole, is how believers of different religions practice their religion in Asia. Even for the Christians outside the West, who assert certain doctrines as not negotiable, practice their faith very much as a way of life. Living in the midst of other religions, they should be rediscovering the importance of some passages in the Bible they have tended to neglect, passage such as 1 John 4:20 that says: “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God they have not seen.”

Religion as a way of life is further said to be “comprehensive, incapable of abandonment, and of central importance” to “those who inhabit it.” A religion for those who “inhabit it” is of central importance to them as long as they “inhabit it,” but is it incapable of being abandoned or changed? It certainly looked that way in former times when people lived in a closely-knit religious community separated from the rest of the world. That religious world was all they knew. That religious universe was all they experienced. They were born into it, grew up in it, got married in it, raised families in it, and died in it. Their religion was a most comprehensive way of life, dictating them from the cradle to the grave. This was certainly the case in Asia and Africa. It was true for indigenous peoples in different parts of the world who inhabited the different continents of the earth.

In recent years, however, we have experienced dramatic changes in our way of life. Moving from one part of the world to another part of the world exposes people to different ways and forms of life. Improvement in people’s economic life has significantly transformed their ways of life, from clothes they wear, to food they eat, to house in which they live, to behaviors they acquire in their social relations. Technological development too has drastically changed their ways of life. Cellular phone is as ubiquitous in the East as in the West, in the South as in the West. It has changed the way people communicate with one another, whether Buddhist, Hindu, Confucian, Muslim, or Christian. Computer is another case in point. It has revolutionized how people do their work and how they communicate with one another. True, there are still millions and millions of people who do not have access to the computer, but the effort to bring it to as many people as possible in all parts of the world continues.

These are just some examples of how ways of people’s lives have both extensively and intensively changed. As people’s lives change, will not their religious faith also change? What was held sacrosanct in the past may not be held sacrosanct any more at the present. What was feared as taboo yesterday may not be a taboo today. What was regarded as binding to the members of a rural community in days past is not binding for urban dwellers any more in a crowded city. This is noticeable even in the practice of ancestor rites. Veneration of the deceased

ancestors has become less and less a matter of the entire clan getting back to the ancestral home for reunion. In most cases even the ancestral home does not exist any longer. And with family members scattered in different parts of the world, separated by continents and oceans, ancestor rites have also become less and less pretentious. They are practiced to remember those who have passed away, to show gratitude to them, and to experience their living presence, in times of joy and distress, in times of crisis as well as prosperity. In this way, with the change of the life we live and the world we inhabit, religion as a way of life changes also. The change may be quick or slow, significant or insignificant, internal or external, intentional or unintentional, but change it will.

Spiritual Universe

If God gives us life and cares for our life, how we fare in life has to be the main concern of all us human beings, life that is vulnerable, finite and temporal, life lived in the shadow of death. For this reason most religious pioneers such as Jesus, the Buddha, Lao Tzu, Confucius, Socrates, addressed themselves to the questions of life, especially the meaning of life confronted with death that threatens to render life meaningless. It is in the arena of life and death that people have to come to terms with religion as practice of compassion over against religion as assent to doctrine.

What Jesus, for example, practiced is the religion as compassion and not religion as assent to doctrine. This is the driving force of his ministry among the poor, the dispossessed and the oppressed. His religion of compassion poses such a departure from assent to the teachings of the official religion that he often finds himself at odds with the religious authorities of his time. His heated controversy with the religious leaders revolves mostly around the issue of life. In his confrontation with the religious authorities he highlights life, not the correct teaching, as the heart of religion and faith. He bluntly declares to the people and the religious leaders that “the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath (Mark 2:27). In saying this, he is restoring the spirit of their religious tradition, turning the sabbath law the right side up, and reminding them that God is the God of life and not the God of dead letters. As if to make sure people get him right, he is reported to have asked them: “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” (3:4)? This is a call, even a plea, from his heart. Is it not this call and this plea that should continue to resound in the world today, the world of religious diversity?

What emerged from Jesus’ ministry of God’s rule is a spiritual universe in which humanity is engaged in the quest of the meaning of life. Jesus has shown

that in this spiritual universe we are dependent on one another for the quest of the meaning of life and for the practice of the ethical imperatives of love, justice and freedom so as to fulfill the meaning of life. Jesus in this way urges people to respect dignity of each religion in the world of the diversity of religions.

This spiritual universe is an integral part of God's creation inhabited by all people, be they Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, or believers of primal religion. In this spiritual universe there are no boundaries to separate believers of one religion from those of the others, no borders to be set up between one race and one class from the other races and other classes. Nor are there frontiers marked by sexual discrimination. What ultimately matters is life with all its vulnerabilities and life with expectations beyond its vulnerabilities. This life makes religious boundaries objectionable, religious borders ludicrous and religious frontiers senseless. Before the vulnerabilities of life and expectations of life we are all equal, no matter where our religious loyalty lies. Before it no one is more equal than others, nor is anyone less equal than others. We all need each other for mutual support and help, and above all we all need God's saving love.

A middle-aged mother of a Dene community in northwestern Alberta, Canada, puts it well when she says: "The most important thing about our native way is that it is a spiritual way. We are spiritual people. No one can take this spirituality away from us."¹ This sounds very much a common-sense matter, unsophisticated theologically and not entangled in religious jargons, but it makes a lot of sense and it is deeply theological. When we realize we are spiritual people, and not merely religious people shaped by our creeds, doctrines or articles of faith, then we also realize that we live in a spiritual world shared by all beings and things created by God. Does not realization such as this enable us to gain deeper experience of how people of different faiths live, believe and hope, and in turn are we not helped to enrich how we live and believe and hope? The more interactive we become with one another in the matters of life and death that confront all of us, we gain more insights into the mysteries that surround us, particularly mysteries of creation in which we all live. Does not this awareness of sharing one spiritual universe also enable us human beings to be more human, to treat nature in a more compassionate way, and to enjoy creation with its endless creativity?

Although not all roads lead to Rome, even though what we believe and how we practice what we believe are different, if we are aware that we all live in the sane spiritual universe, do we not, then, begin to enjoy each other's religious dignity in the midst of religious diversity?

¹ See Achiel Peelman, *Christ is a Native American* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), p.22.