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SEEKING THE RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF PLURALISM

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I am a Christian theologian from South Korea. When I think about Christianity in human history, it has been one of the most exclusivistic religions, and we have this record of crusades, witch hunts, colonization in the name of God, and imperialistic Western expansion in the name of Christianity. So, I come with my historical burden, but here I want to talk about pluralism, specifically from the perspective of Korean Protestant women.

When I was a young feminist in my twenties, I saw a T-shirt that grabbed my attention. It read, "Women who want to be equal to men lack ambition." I felt how true that was. Throughout all my participation in various people's movements, such as the Anti-colonization Nationalist movement, the Democratization movement, and the Labor movement in Korea, I felt in my bones that, indeed, women are the last colony. Following Virginia Woolf's words, "As a woman, I don't have a country," I want to add that, as a woman, I do not *want* a country. As a woman, the whole world is my country.

When I heard about the topic for this occasion, the first thing that came up in my mind was that T-shirt I saw when I was twenty. Now, as a forty-year old Asian, postmodern, eco-feminist, liberation-feminist theologian, I would like to say that people who want religious pluralism in church and society lack ambition. Following the debates on pluralism in academia, the church, and society, I have been disappointed, because calling for pluralism still seems to remain at the "minimum level of tolerance for the differences." Of course, that is important. After witnessing painful conflicts in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and India and the burning of churches in the South here and the burning of temples in Korea, I know how important it is to have a minimum level of tolerance such as not to kill or violate other human beings in the name of God or in the name of the Holy.

I am, however, unsatisfied when I listen to the importance of pluralism, diversity, multiculturalism, and cross-cultural understanding of academia, church, and society in the U.S.A., because their emphasis on pluralism, diversity, and multiculturalism is establishing soft, not hard, pluralism, diversity, and multiculturalism. Soft pluralism or multiculturalism means we welcome ethnic food, ethnic clothing, ethnic music. You can have a Chinese breakfast, Italian lunch, and French dinner, but do not touch our political or economic power. You can also contribute in these soft areas, but we are for the capitalist globalization, Coca-colonization, CNN-ization of the world, so we do not have any willingness to share this kind of power. We do not want to have respect for differences in this area. Therefore, soft pluralism does not

deal with serious economic and political power or differences. I call it lazy, selfish, immoral pluralism.

Without dealing with this lazy pluralism in politicoeconomic justice, I do not know whether we can have religious pluralism in religion or *vice versa*. Therefore, I do not like the common usage of "pluralism." I think that we have to go beyond pluralism. We need an interdependent, interpenetrating, power-sharing, mutual transformation for our common survival and liberation and for the sustainable earth community.

The organizers of this panel asked me to provide a justification of pluralism within my religious tradition. After being forced to justify my mere existence as an Asian intellectual woman for so many years, I do not want to use up my precious time for another sort of justification. Rather, I want to say, "I am who I am, and religious pluralism is what it is." It is a fact. Look at the world; there are thousands of different religions, thousands of different manifestations of Christianities in Asia, Africa, and the Latin Americas. Whether you like it or not, they are there. However, I want to pinpoint some theological foundations that are open to religious pluralism and move to my ambition of going beyond religious pluralism.

My Christian tradition has been one of the most exclusivistic religions of the world and one of the religions that has created the most wars in human history — claiming the uniqueness, finality, and centrality of Jesus Christ and claiming no salvation without Jesus Christ. We do have an alternative tradition that is more inclusive and open to other religious traditions. First, I will call it creation tradition. We believe that God is a creator. God created everything in the world and said, "It is beautiful." In this creation, the other world religions are included. Therefore, other religions are also beautiful in God's eyes. I also want to pinpoint the tradition of mysticism in Christianity. In Christian mysticism, God is beyond our naming, beyond our form and imagination. God is pure emptiness, as Meister Eckhardt said. Talking about God is always the speaking of the unspeakable in this tradition. We share the silence of this original emptiness. In this mystical union, silence and emptiness are the places for all other religions.

I also want to point to the tradition of Gnosticism in Christianity. In Christian Gnosticism, which was defined by our church as heretical, every one of us shares a divine spark, a divine wisdom, that will connect us to God. This divine wisdom and spark we share with everybody. This divine spark can be interpreted as Tao, Prajnaparamita, Brahman. Here we can meet with all other world religions. In Gnosticism, Jesus said, "If you bring out what is within you, what is within you will save you. But, if you cannot bring out what is within you, then what is within you will destroy you." In this "what is within you," we can meet all the people of all the other religions.

Why must we go beyond religious pluralism? When people ask what I am religiously, I say, "My bowel is Shamanist. My heart is Buddhist. My right brain, which defines my mood, is Confucian and Taoist. My left brain, which defines

my public language, is Protestant Christian, and, overall, my aura is eco-feminist." I am proud to say that it took three Master's degrees and one Ph.D. in theology, five years in intense psychotherapy and Zen meditation, and my participation in various people's movements! As a Korean woman, I was raised in the 5,000-year-old Shamanist tradition and the 2,000-year-old Taoist-Confucian tradition, with 2,000 years of Buddhist tradition, 100 years of Protestant tradition, and twenty years of eco-feminist tradition. So, my body is like a religious pantheon. I am living with communities of Gods, a continuum of divinity, and a family of religions. Therefore, I need many years of archeological exploration of my religiosity within my body and within my community. Especially as a woman, it is necessary.

So-called, all higher world religions are patriarchal and are institutionalized under the patriarchal light. So we have patriarchal Buddhists and patriarchal Christians having interreligious dialogue, and we have a nice patriarchal conclusion there. This is not just my existential reality but the reality of many women's popular religiosity in Asia. Women are margins of the patriarchal, institutional churches, and, of course, the Korean Church embodied the nineteenth-century American imperialistic, triumphalistic, fundamentalist Protestantism that brought Christianity, with American political imperialism, to Korea. What we learned from Christianity was the ultimate missionary position! Western culture is always up, and our culture and experience are always down. In order to overcome this missionary position, we have to get back our primordial religious experience.

When I look at our women's religious experience very critically, it is not a religious pluralism. It is sometimes syncretism, sometimes symbiosis, and sometimes a synergetic dance of many religions in our daily lives. Therefore, when I see the debate of religious pluralism in the United States, I feel that it seems very academic, very Western, very male. By academic, I mean that, when I look at women's popular religiosity, each religion — Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism — is not a neatly separated, packaged, or sanitized religion. It is all blurry. They permeate each other. It is not like a packaged, sanitized Perdue chicken bleeding there. Also, when I think about this debate, it is very Western because many world religions in the West are still very young. So, communities are not intermingled, and religious values did not become mainline cultural values. However, when you come to Asia, our religious and our cultural values many times are intermingled.

I also think it is a very male-centered perspective, because, in our academic discipline, we say "pluralism, yes" but "syncretism, hell no," because I think there is a fear of chaos, a fear of the body. In the Christian tradition, we mix and appreciate other religions in a kind of religious adultery. When I look at women's religiosity, I can see that it can be described with the metaphors of a medicine chest, a kaleidoscope, and alchemy, because women use the different drawers of this medicine chest to heal, to liberate, and to survive. They also intermingle some part of their religions for their life, for their survival, through

multiple colors and shapes of the kaleidoscope. It is also alchemy, as women mix something and develop something new. So, there are many fusions of horizons, which I think is the future.

Of course, there are many dangers. There are many people who ask about this danger: "Are you making stew, soup, or a salad bar?" No, it is not stew or soup or a salad bar. Rather, it is like a living organism. At the center, there is a center criterion, which is of course subjective, but it is based on women's survival and liberation. Sometimes it is very dangerous, because their survival and liberation are really at the expense of others; however, I think that, by our common dialogue, sharing, and participation in the common liberation praxis, we can expand our criteria. Our criteria should be justice and peace, the integrity of creation, and building of a sustainable, life-giving earth community.

What I am saying is that it is not a kind of intermingling where hegemonic power eats up all other differences. Rather, in this fusion of horizons, differences vivify, transform, and enhance each other—as Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum said, "Our differences enhance our lives." For me, as an Asian Christian woman, God is not one. God is not many. God is energy beyond one and many. God penetrates and permeates all of us. We are all children of God, and all religions are different-colored flowers in this magnificently beautiful and painful garden of God called Earth.

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SEEKING THE RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF PLURALISM IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: AN AMERICAN MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

As we await the closing years of both the century and the millennium, we must begin to say to ourselves that we are, in the language of the Chinese sage, "living in interesting times." Alternatively, we can say with Charles Dickens that "these are the best of times and the worst of times," depending on how one views the world. Regardless of our perspectives on the nature of things in this world, there are three facts that cannot be denied by any human being living in the midst of things on this planet. The first is the phenomenon of globalization, which is tearing down all the walls of separation that have kept

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