

# Religions Without Walls: An Ethnography

Samuel Cruz, *Union Theological Seminary*

**A**s a sociologist of religion, I am equally inquisitive about the contexts within which theologies are birthed as in their content. Latin American Liberation Theologies have established that all theologies emanate from and respond to concrete social-political and historical realities. Scholars engaged in Religious Studies – theologians, anthropologists, sociologists of religion, etc. – as well as interested lay people, usually adhere to sociological and/or anthropological explanations for the religious and theological beliefs held by practitioners of the religious and spiritual traditions under study. This is particularly true for religions practiced by marginalized communities within their cultural and historical traditions. In my methods course on the study of urban life and religion, I consistently point out to my students that scholars of religion choose to study the religious practices of the marginalized as a means of discovering sociological and anthropological reasons for their belief systems, yet do not consider discovering, nor attempting to analyze the sociological and anthropological roots of religious practices among dominant groups in our society. Epistemological assumptions are made that validate some religions and subjugate others. For example, mainline Christianity – as it is found in Churches like Trinity Wall Street, St. Patrick’s Cathedral or Riverside Church in NYC – is blindly accepted as pure and normative Christianity. In other words, there

are no serious attempts to understand why these churches and their adherents do what they do. The contexts in which these religions were birthed, and within which their belief systems emerged and formed, are disavowed as irrelevant as a tacit act of power. Therefore, from this institutionally privileged perspective it might seem logical and acceptable to say that Pentecostalism developed as a response or reaction to specific needs, such as emanating from the economic and political disenfranchisement of its followers, but such assumptions are not made about religious beliefs found among dominant sectors of our society.<sup>1</sup> Researchers rarely, if ever, conclude that places like Trinity Wall Street might be meeting the needs of perhaps their wealthy followers who need to theologically justify their priorities, investments and/or cultural elitism. In many ways this unconscious bias leads to the conclusion that some religious practices are unquestionably respectable and more “pure,” as they are not perceived to emanate from specific socio-cultural, economic and political contexts or driven by human needs. Consequently, these beliefs and practices become part of the dominant “pure” or normative theology. To be clear, these and other unconscious value judgements cause me to be highly suspicious of the new theologies of pluralism, religions without walls, and interreligious engagement trends.

When anthropologists and sociologists embark upon ethnographic studies, the sociological and/or anthropological gaze is turned upon the subject of inquiry. I would contend that this gaze is rarely turned upon mainstream academic, cultural and theological production. We simply do not turn the gaze upon ourselves as we

---

1. That is why, historically, the sociological theory depended upon to study Pentecostalism was that of the now debunked perspective called “deprivation theory.” See: Killian McDonnell, *Introduction in Charismatic Renewal and the Churches* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976).

arrive at scholarly conclusions. Quite often, simplistic forms of socio-analysis are instead performed that fail to consider more deeply the contexts from which our own espoused perspectives emerge. While we often acknowledge the obvious contexts, such as being male, White, heterosexual, etc., rarely analyzed are the roles of our places in academia or the historical and social conditions that give rise to our own theological productions.<sup>2</sup> For example, the process of globalization has inadvertently forced the rapid rise of economic, cultural, political and religious pluralism, which has propelled increased interest in inter-religious engagement/Inter-faith dialogue over the past twenty-five years. A review of the discussions and theologies produced by scholars might lead one to believe that interreligious theologies are the product of scholarly concern about engaging in dialogues that include diverse religious traditions, either because of a belief that it is the correct and moral thing to do, or because such scholars are enlightened progressives.<sup>3</sup> However, it was not until the process of globalization accelerated the movement of great numbers of immigrants and resulted in inescapable interactions between groups reflecting many different faith traditions, that interfaith dialogue was propelled. In other words, interreligious theologies were contextually motivated rather than altruistically inspired. Instead of explaining these phenomena in an ethnographically grounded political economy of social actors and institutions, many scholars retort to an auto-poetic default that individualizes what is ostensibly a social field in need of rigorous analysis and critique.

---

2. Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

3. Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace and Noah J. Silverman, eds., *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining A New Field* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

Religious scholars have assumed that they have consciously engaged in this work for the aforementioned ethical reasons, but in actuality those involved in this work have not necessarily overcome the biases, racism and prejudices previously perpetrated in most theological production.<sup>4</sup> This largely reactive push for interreligious dialogue is a response to having been thrust into the historical phenomenon of globalization. Globalization has accelerated religious pluralism in the United States – as it was already a society with an open and free religious market – providing fertile ground for the advent of religious diversity and supplying numerous and varied spiritual choices or commodities. Indeed, religious pluralism has brought vitality to the religious market.<sup>5</sup> However, liberal and progressive Christianity has not competed well in this environment, with mainline Christianity experiencing a steady decline in membership and relevance for over 75 years.<sup>6</sup> Fundamentalist and conservative churches and new religious movements have simultaneously flourished, leaving liberal/progressive Christianity to seek new modes of survival. To my surmise, declining mainline churches have turned towards interreligious engagement as an

---

4. There has been the expectation that somehow interreligious theologies would correct this. See Jeannine Hill Fletcher, “The Promising Practice of Anti-Racist Approaches to interfaith Studies,” in *Interreligious/interfaith Studies: Defining A New Field*, ed. Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace and Noah J. Silverman (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

5. See: Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churaching of America 1776–1990: Winners and Losers in our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994); S.R. Warner, “Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States,” *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no.5 (March 1993): 1044–1093.

6. Gregory A. Smith, Alan Cooperman, Besheer Mohamed, Elizabeth Podrebarac Scrupac, Becka A. Alper, Kiana Cox, and Claire Gecewicz, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

opportunity to survive in a religiously pluralistic environment. For many years, religious scholars believed that all Christian churches were dying, when in reality they had simply ignored the growth occurring in non-liberal/progressive churches. Further hindering the growth of liberal/progressive churches are the still prevalent racism and hegemonic desire that continue to buttress the exclusion of Black and Brown spiritualities from the buffet of religions with which to engage.

Theological schools and secular universities have more readily shifted their curricula to deal with the societal challenges of the epoch but seem ideologically blocked from considering shifts in their curricula to include representation of Black and/or Brown citizens, community members, neighbors, students, and consumers who have comprised segments of their communities in significant numbers for decades or longer. Further, interreligious engagement studies in these schools and universities preclude a recognition of and engagement with religious traditions practiced by disenfranchised members of society, regardless of whether the schools themselves are located within communities practicing these traditions. To do so would require an approach that would include giving up privileging Euro-centric analyses, and a willingness to cease the safeguarding of our theological ethnophilosophies lest they become completely irrelevant. As Dr. Rivera Colon has argued: “Maybe the problem is that Euro-American theological production has to account for itself.”<sup>7</sup> A recent conversation with Rev. Raymond Rivera, founder and executive director of the Latino Pastoral Action Center, developed this point further when he discussed his feeling that theologies of pluralism might have to engage in dialogue with marginalized

---

7. Telephone conversation with Dr. Edgar Rivera-Colon on July 10th, 2020.

religious practices and begin to approach interreligious dialogue from a “deficit model.” According to Rivera, this approach must acknowledge the history of colonial brutality and white supremacy underpinning Christian theologies.<sup>8</sup>

The well-intended emphasis on interreligious studies is accompanied by a methodology steeped in the ways of Euro-centric Christian dominance. Historically, the leading perpetrators of religious imperialism and hegemony have been Western European agents of Christianity:<sup>9</sup> the same community that is now “leading” the religious engagement dialogue. Is this starting point best suited for the development of a theology without walls? These problematic issues are intimately tied to the place from which these pluralistic theologies emanate. For example, who decides which are the religious traditions to be engaged in inter-religious dialogue? I’m not suggesting that it is an impossible task, but how can we safeguard against the inherent problems that will arise? Failure to address these pitfalls would be analogous to tasking the White community with determining how best to rid our society of racism or asking the police to take the lead in reforming abusive policing.

Let us discuss some of these inherent challenges within the current theologies of pluralism. In a conversation with Dr. Paul Knitter, a friend, former colleague, and leading voice in the movement of theological inter-religious engagement, he suggested that only traditions active in social justice should be engaged in inter-religious dialogue. Obviously, all theological perspectives have foundational beliefs that are important for those who

---

8. Telephone conversation with Rev. Raymond Rivera on July 7th, 2020.

9. See Luis N. Rivera, *A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990).

subscribe to them. However, in order to engage others, if we begin by imposing such limited categories – in this case one that is not even accepted by all within the Christian tradition – the perils of exclusion and omission become unavoidable. In my estimation, this scholar has made a misguided assumption that permeates liberal/progressive theologies: that religion should be mainly about social justice. I happen to subscribe to Latin American Liberation Theology which can be considered the social justice theology par excellence, yet I cannot assume that religious thought should only regard liberationist perspectives. That would be arrogant, and an axiomatic generalized imposition on religious thought. I shared with Dr. Knitter my concern about his premise, and he acknowledged that it was his prejudice, conceding that it might be problematic. He added that he saw another problem in his analysis, saying: “I am a Christian who believes Jesus has very important things to say, and that they should be heard.”<sup>10</sup> Herein lies a theoretical/epistemological problem that is even more problematic than his admitted bias: Euro-American scholars make the assumption that because they are aware of a problem, the problem is thereby resolved.<sup>11</sup> Knowledge of this particular bias did not prompt this scholar to remove it from his theological work, nor did it help him to acknowledge how it could possibly affect his theological production.

The issue of text-based vs. oral religious traditions as related to interreligious dialogue has caught the attention of theorists from the global south who have questioned why the text-based community has captured the attentions of those interested in

---

10. Telephone conversation with Dr. Paul Knitter on October 14th, 2019.

11. Foucault called this a “ruse of knowledge.” See “Truth and Method,” in *An Introduction to Foucault’s Thought with Major New Unpublished Material*, ed. Paul Rainbow (Pantheon Books, New York, 1984).

engaging these text-based traditions while marginalizing orally based traditions. Why are religious traditions that have texts privileged over the oral traditions? I posed this question to Dr. Edgar Rivera Colon, a cultural and narrative medicine anthropologist who responded that, “text allows for the codification and centralization which enable elites to mobilize their power for political and social control.”<sup>12</sup> Texts are usually found within the domain of the erudite, giving them the ability to determine what is worthy of study and even provides opportunities for the appropriation of the traditions of others who do not have scholarly tools at their disposal. Oral traditions are more likely to be problematic for those who want to take ownership of a discipline or tradition, and since oral traditions are more fluid, they are not as easily susceptible to being manipulated by elites. R. S. Sugirtharajah argues that the field of New Testament studies was to some extent developed as a way of maintaining hegemony of thought as the empire expanded.<sup>13</sup> We should therefore ask ourselves if the absence of oral religious traditions in inter-religious dialogue reflects an unconscious decision to maintain a colonial hold on theological discourses in post-colonial era. From a practical perspective, “dead text” is much more easily manipulated than lived experience as expressed through words and actions. Gustavo Gutierrez defined theology as “critical reflection on Praxis.”<sup>14</sup> He emphasized that theology begins with lived experience which cannot be as easily manipulated as dead text. Francisco C. Rolim, a sociologist of religion and scholar of

---

12. Conversation with anthropologist Dr. Edgar Rivera Colon.

13. R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

14. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 9.



Brazilian Pentecostalism, in providing his analysis of the practice of speaking in tongues, makes the observation that adherents of Brazilian Pentecostalism engage in speaking unknown languages thereby rejecting the verbal which is controlled by the erudite.<sup>15</sup> Practitioners and leaders of Pentecostalism in Brazil and throughout Latin America are aware of the intentions of seminary trained religious leaders who want to take control of the spiritualities of marginalized groups as well as their religious traditions. It is for this reason that participants will often hear Pentecostal leaders declare that, although they might not have formal university and seminary training, they have been trained by the Holy Spirit in bible, prayer and fasting. Pentecostal followers and leaders are acutely aware that textual erudition can be used to usurp indigenous leadership and result in the appropriation of their religious traditions. The presumptuous practice by the North of defining what religion is, and determining what is legitimate, good, acceptable or unacceptable religion, will continue to transpire as long as the means of religious production are controlled by those who are located in the center of the empire.

Cultural and religious racism and elitism also threaten the integrity of any inter-religious engagement. I would argue that this pitfall becomes especially problematic in the case of liberal/progressive scholars, as there seems to be a belief among liberals/progressives in general, that they are devoid of any racist and elitist views. It is compelling to witness the readiness with which religious and theological scholars forget the historical legacy of misogyny, homophobia, racism and classism found in the history of the Christian theological enterprise, as well as that of many other

---

15. Francisco C. Rolim, *Pentecostes No Brasil: Uma Interpretacao Socio-Religiosa* (Rio de Janeiro: Petropolis Vozes, 1980).

religious traditions. On one occasion during which I was lecturing on Haitian Vodou, this eminent scholar, who happens to be a leader of inter-religious dialogue, Dr. Paul Knitter, asked me if I had “dealt with the problem of evil in Vodou.”<sup>16</sup> I was initially confused by the question because my intent in studying any religious tradition or movement is to understand its history and expressions among adherents. Once it became clear to me that this question emerged from ignorant and racist ideas about Haitian Vodou, and the reality set in that these biases are held by scholars and lay persons alike, I was able to respond. I answered, “I have not focused on the evil perpetrated by Vodou, if any exists, because it is insignificant compared to the evils perpetrated by the Church throughout the last two millennia.” Knitter made the assumption that Vodou, the principal religion of Haiti, is evil. He relegated its core essence – not to philosophy, medicine, justice, spirituality – but to performing evil using pins, needles, and dolls. After the lecture, I asked Dr. Knitter – my friend and colleague – what he was thinking with regard to his question, and he acknowledged that he was operating under the stereotypical and racist assumptions portrayed in popular culture about Vodou. Dr. Knitter was apparently operating under the assumption made by many scholars and lay people that Haitian Vodou is a “primitive religion.” In order to rouse my students from blind adherence to societal biases regarding religion and religious traditions, I will frequently discuss how interesting it is that we view the sacrifice of a chicken in a Santeria or Haitian Vodou ritual to the orishas as primitive, yet we are perfectly comfortable participating in and/or condoning the ritual of the Holy Eucharist in which believers eat the body and drink the blood of a man who died

---

16. I am grateful to Dr. Paul Knitter for engaging with me in conversation about these issues and for allowing me to speak of these two issues on which I had challenged him.

two thousand years ago.

The religious practice of ritualistic sacrifice of chickens and other animals by practitioners of the Lucumi religion has been regarded with contempt, not only by religious sectors but by political and juridical institutions. In 1987, the city of Hialeah, South Florida, passed an ordinance prohibiting animal sacrifice *in religious ceremonies* for the purpose of ending the ritual sacrifice of animals in public or private religious ceremonies. The new law did not prohibit the killing of animals, but only banned their killing as part of religious ceremonies. This prohibition was adopted after adherents of Santeria, a Cuban-African religion whose religious rituals include the sacrifice of chickens, goats, sheep, ducks and other animals, announced plans to open a church on an abandoned used car lot in Hialeah. When the city council heard that the Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye was coming to its city they enacted the ordinance. The church filed a lawsuit in the United States district court for the Southern District of Florida seeking that the Hialeah ordinance be declared unconstitutional. In order to maintain their sacred religious rituals, the church had to challenge this ordinance through the courts, all the way to the supreme court. The case, *Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. v. Hialeah*, 508 U.S. 520 (1993), was decided in favor of the Lukumi Babalu Aye by the Supreme Court of the United States. The Court affirmed the principle that laws targeting specific religions violate the free-exercise clause of the First Amendment – which states that the government shall make no law prohibiting the free exercise of religion – and held that the ordinance passed in Hialeah, Florida, forbidding the “unnecessary” killing of “an animal in a public or private ritual or ceremony not for the primary purpose of food consumption,” was unconstitutional. What makes this case interesting is that so many people were concerned with the ritual

sacrifice of chickens and goats as cruel and primitive, but most have never complained about the cruel treatment and killings of millions of chickens a year in poultry farms throughout developed countries across the world, including the United States.<sup>17</sup>

How can religious scholars disengage from the wider biases about religion that are so ingrained in the fabric of our culture? As with racism, religious marginalization can also take the form of eroticizing the religious practices of the other. The following example elucidates the other side of the problem in which the denigration of Santeria is manifested in an eroticizing of the ritual sacrifice of animals. I had a student from a Scandinavian country who wanted to conduct her field work and major interview for my class with a priest or priestess of the Lucumi tradition. We identified the spiritual leader with whom she would engage in conversation throughout the semester. At the end of the semester, she expressed her frustration with this Lucumi priest, explaining that he would never answer her questions and would instead speak only about what he wanted to discuss. It turns out that she was only interested in knowing about the rituals of animal sacrifices and focused her many questions only on this aspect among so many others in this religious tradition. The priest eventually informed me that he felt that she, like many who want to learn about African diasporic religions, was simply interested in what she perceived to be exotic aspects of the traditions. He shared his view that this student, like many others who diminish the significance of his traditions, failed to demonstrate any serious interest in its philosophies, belief system and spirituality. Certainly, I am not suggesting that outsiders cannot

---

17. Compilations Net, "Live Fast, Die Young, The Life of a Meat Chicken," September 13, 2017, YouTube Video, 7:58. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h2rP\\_jgCAQ0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h2rP_jgCAQ0).

accomplish honest ethnographic studies. However, any attempt to do this type of research without reflexive analysis can only lead to misguided, simplistic and even dangerous conclusions. We must keep in mind that there is ample historical information about the many ways in which racial ideology has influenced theological, sociological and anthropological studies.

How do we rid ourselves, for example, of notions of superiority regarding monotheism over polytheism that are proudly touted by adherents of Christianity, Islam and Judaism, as well as by other monotheistic religious traditions? Although polytheism is not an inferior theological position to that of monotheism, certain traditions have been mislabeled by scholars as polytheistic, perhaps in attempts to malign them, when some would argue they are not. African theologian Olupona makes the observation that what some western theologians and religious scholars perceive to be polytheistic theologies in certain African religions, in actuality are more analogous to what he would characterize as Bureaucratic monotheism (his term). Olupona contends that these African theologies are actually very similar to the monotheism of Christianity in which there is a system composed of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as well as angels and other spirits.<sup>18</sup>

The classist and racist disparagement of religions on the margins goes far beyond scholarly characterizations, such as syncretic, primitive, polytheistic and extends beyond these labels into judgements such as evil, witchcraft and even sorcery – terminologies and ideas that emerge from cultural and societal realms even more than from the academic world. Without serious socio-analysis of the theological field itself, a valid theology of

---

18. Caleb O. Olupona, *The Development of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Yoruba (African) Indigenous Christian Movement* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996).

pluralism will always be a truncated or failed project. We must understand how we determine what constitutes religion, how positive and negative attributes are ascribed to religious traditions, and how decisions are made regarding which religions are worthy of studying/engaging. As stated by, Pierre Bourdieu:

Because religion, like all symbolic systems, is predisposed to fulfill a function of association and dissociation or, better, of distinction, a system of practices and beliefs is made to appear as magic or sorcery, an inferior religion, whenever it occupies a dominated position in the structure of relations of symbolic power, that is, in the system of relations between the systems of practices and beliefs belonging to a determined social formation.<sup>19</sup>

If symbolic systems like religion, can provide cultural capital not only for its practitioners, but also to religious scholars, then we can make the assumption that the research and engagement of different religious traditions is influenced by the status ascribed to these traditions by the dominant society. How can engagement of religious tradition “A,” located in the upper socio-cultural and economic sector of society, enhance our academic careers as opposed to engagement of marginalized religious tradition “B,” located within the lower socio-economic strata? Following Bourdieu’s logic, the engagement of a specific religion can provide capital to the agent of its engagement. In addition, we might be led more readily to study the more culturally acceptable and/or powerful traditions within the particular historical milieu in which our research is being done.

---

19. Pierre Bourdieu, “Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field,” in *Comparative Social Research* vol. 13, ed. Craig Calhoun (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1991), 12.

Examples found within societal and cultural realms can clearly illustrate the unwitting formation of such biases. Widely accepted throughout our country is the myth that we have model minorities (i.e., Asian immigrants). In reality, this myth has hurt Asian immigrants and other immigrant groups in a myriad of ways, such as by widely perpetuating a “blame game” that has not only shamed struggling members of Asian communities, but has also scapegoated other immigrant communities, including African Americans. This false narrative has given rise to an eroticizing of Asian culture, especially among white liberal/progressives. In the 1960’s many artists and cultural revolutionaries turned to Asian religious traditions for answers to their spiritual quests with adherence to spiritual groups emerging from India becoming fashionable.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, it has not yet been fashionable to join, engage or align with spiritual groups found among African American or Latinx communities. The religions of the “model” minority instead captured the interests of Westerners in search of spiritual connectedness, as countless adherents and/or practitioners of these religious traditions can be found today as throughout recent decades. In similar fashion, White couples seem to prefer to adopt Asian children, with Asian adoptions tripling in the last 25 years, while the adoption of Black children has only decreased here in the United States.<sup>21</sup> Another example can be seen with scholars engaged in comparative literature studies, as they ascribe to Euro-centric biases when choosing which traditions to highlight. Cultural critic

---

20. See: Vijay Prashad, *Uncle Swami: South Asians in America Today* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

21. Nicholas Zill, “The Changing Face of Adoption in the United States,” Charlottesville, VA: Institute for Family Studies, 2017, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-changing-face-of-adoption-in-the-united-states>.

Rey Chow's critique of comparative literature aptly applies to theologies of pluralism:

Of all the prominent features of Eurocentrism, the one that stands out in the context of the university is the conception of culture as based on the modern European notion of the nation state. In this light, comparative literature has been rightly criticized for having concentrated on the literatures of a few strong nation-states in modern Europe. But the problem does not go away if we simply substitute India and China, and Japan for England, France, and Germany. To this day we still witness publications that bear titles such as comparative approaches to "masterpieces of Asian literature" which adopt precisely this Eurocentric, nation-oriented model of literature in the name of the other. In such instances, the concept of literature is strictly subordinated to social Darwinian understanding of the nation: 'masterpieces' correspond to 'master' nations and 'master' cultures. With India, China and Japan being held as representative of Asia, cultures of lesser prominence in Western reception such as Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Tibet and others simply fall by the wayside—as marginalized 'others' to the 'other' that is the 'great' Asian civilizations.<sup>22</sup>

In the introduction to *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative* (2020), I was astonished by the following claim made by Jerry L. Martin:

The trans-religious turn follows ineluctably from the discovery, profound in its depths and implications, of divine or ultimate truth in multiple traditions.<sup>23</sup>

---

22. Rey Chow, "In the Name of Comparative Literature," in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 109.

23. Jerry L. Martin, ed., *Theology Without Walls: The trans-religious Imperative* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 1.



Martin seems to make the assumption that religious thinking is preoccupied with ultimate truth and with the divine. One must then conclude, following his logic, that religious traditions which do not have an interest in the divine need not be engaged, nor do these traditions offer any useful theology. Further, does this imply that traditions which do not bear the arrogance of seeking “the ultimate truth” need not be engaged? Even more egregious than these aforementioned biases is the inherent arrogance of his statement, which is predicated upon the belief that the criteria of theological production must be evaluated by Christian, Judaic and Muslim perspectives. I wonder where he would place theological and religious thought that is not interested or arrogant enough to claim to know about the divine or about ultimate realities?

In actuality, the search for ultimate reality is not necessarily a priority or even highly emphasized within many Christian traditions. In the more “progressive” sectors of U.S. Latinx theologies, the emphasis of religious thought is the “cotidiano”<sup>24</sup> which places far more emphasis on the impact of thought upon daily life in the here and now. A search for what may be the ultimate truth is far less important. African religious traditions in the diaspora are also less interested in understanding ultimate reality and far more concerned about how to live in harmony with the surrounding world around them (i.e., other people, the earth and all living creatures).<sup>25</sup>

---

24. In Mujerista theology, *lo cotidiano* (everyday life) focuses on the struggles that Latinx women deal with on a daily basis. See Ada Maria Isasi Diaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the 21st Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

25. See: Jacob K. Olupona, ed., *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* (St. Paul MN: Paragon House, 1991); Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Joseph Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

A theology of religions, in my perspective, has a great deal to learn from practitioners of religions on the margins of society. Although double belonging has become more fashionable and appears to be a new theological discovery, this has existed in a far more fluid manner for a long time. Latinx scholars of religion have long realized that Latinx communities' practice what we termed "multiple religious affiliations." Scholars of interreligious engagement should take an interest in understanding how this has been accomplished for hundreds of years by people who had to negotiate the existence of multiple cosmologies or roads to the divine. Similarities between the theologies without walls found in African diasporic religious thought and the euro-centric theologies of the twenty-first century can be seen.

The late anthropologist of religion Karen McCarthy Brown argued that:

Christianity is like a concrete wall – new ideas come to it and they bounce off – and African religious traditions found in the Diaspora are like amoebas which are able to absorb new ideas and make them a part of the system. The hegemonic DNA of Christianity and Islam are problematic in their potential for participating in interreligious theologies with theological humility and integrity.<sup>26</sup>

And simply knowing that reality is not enough to neutralize its force when attempting to do theologies of pluralism/religion without walls. I would contend that there are several factors which contribute to this hegemonic disposition: power/control, false notions of purity, lack of humility, and a failure to be grounded in reality.

---

26. This statement was made by Dr. McCarthy Brown at Drew University when I was in her doctoral seminar for the Newark Project in the year 2001.

Religious thought most frequently provides legitimization of the political and economic structure of a society. In order for political and religious systems to maintain control they have to convince a majority of people in the society that their political or religious system of belief is not only the correct one, but also that it is the only meaningful choice. Maintaining this control without challenges has been a critical aspect of American Christianity, as this religious tradition buttresses a capitalist Eurocentric and American political system, including its White supremacist ideology that resides in the underbelly of its foundation. Maintaining power and control are of utmost essence for these imperialistic oriented traditions. The false notion of purity has been essential in maintaining a hierarchical and stratified religious field. Historically, throughout the anthropological and theological study of religion, the African based religions were pejoratively referred to as syncretistic – a method of devaluing the traditions that joined two or more traditions into one – while dominant religions were sanctioned as “pure” religious traditions, and consequently exalted. For centuries to the recent times, the false notion of purity was viewed as an accurate portrayal of Christianity despite obvious evidence to the contrary, specifically sociological and anthropological evidence of the fluid nature of all religious systems and spiritual traditions. Culture and cultural systems are always changing and constantly in flux, including a borrowing and mixing with other cultural traditions. It is indisputable that Christianity is made up of different religious and philosophical traditions which include, at a minimum: Judaism, Greco-Roman culture, neo-platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, and other social thought.

Apart from its birth – and a few additional exceptions, as noted above – Christianity has not grounded itself in concrete lived reality. It can instead be characterized as a religious tradition that

has been more concerned with esoteric ideas about the ultimate and more preoccupied with divinity than with spiritual interaction in daily life.<sup>27</sup> In order for Christianity to be engaged in truly interreligious conversations, those attempting to foster this process must become aware of their positions as stakeholders in the process. Scholars must relinquish the assumption that Christianity and dominant religious traditions located at the centers of power are normative and instead must begin to operate as if the theological traditions coming forth from the Christian discipline are as mutable, syncretistic and fluid as any belief system located at the margins of our society. Scholars must become sentient in unraveling unconscious methodological approaches which lead to assumptions that a Eurocentric understanding of religious thought is the norm. Critically important to the purity of this process is to heed the far-reaching, albeit unconscious, influences that classism and racism have on our theological and methodological production. The late, internationally renowned, philosopher and sociologist of religion, Otto Maduro, always reminded me that we must exercise humility in our pursuit of knowledge. I believe this is critical advice that we all should heed.

---

27. See Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Eduardo Mendieta, eds., *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).