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Response to Prof. James Massey's *Global Religious Education: Dalit Perspective*

My response focuses on the second section of Professor Massey's piece, 'Global Religious Education and Faith Communities,' though aspects of the first section are relevant. Specifically, I want to follow up on an implication of his account regarding the *tasks* of global religious education and their *ordering*. Because my response is motivated by what I take to be an implication, I do not want to be read as offering a criticism or accusation. Massey's piece provoked the following thoughts; I am offering a counter-provocation.

Massey distinguishes two *tasks* for global religious education. The first is Hans Kung's 'global ethical task': finding the common ethical features among the world religions. The second is Massey's own proposal: understanding and appreciating those differences that constitute the various world religions *as* different from each other. These two tasks are similar in that both are meant to contribute to the establishment of peace on local and global levels. At the same time, Massey suggests that the second task is more significant: since the conflicts that endanger global peace are motivated by differences, "understanding and appreciating the differences can take us to a level where we can be comfortable even with our opponents." Massey here seems to recognize that conflict is inevitable. A common ethic derived from the world religions, by and of itself, cannot ensure that we come to recognize and respect the differences that separate us religiously; it can only restrain us from coping with these differences violently. And if religious differences begin to be defined *against* some recognized common ethic, then these restraints will be loosened. The real issue is how to live together, positively and peacefully, with those we perceive as 'religious opponents,' with those whose differences persist in the wake of recognized commonalities. Massey insists that the solution lies in understanding and appreciating such differences.

Massey implies an *ordering* for these two tasks. He claims that, in India, "we have not only arrived at the common denominator drawn from the 'common ethic' that Prof. Hans Kung referred to, but we are also working towards appreciating the differences among ourselves." The implication is that finding common ethical features *precedes* understanding and appreciating differences. Now, in the sentence just quoted, Massey is offering a narrative account – We've accomplished this, now we're going to accomplish that – so no procedural norm is necessitated between 'this' and 'that.' However, Massey's claim that finding commonalities "brings us closer up to one level *only*" (italics mine), suggests that the level of 'comfort with opponents' promised by appreciating differences is higher, further implying that the latter task must succeed the former in global religious education.

On one hand, this is uncontroversial. Identifying differences between any phenomena requires the recognition of some background commonality, if those differences are to be at all salient. Comparing apples and oranges is indeed fruitless if one wants to identify the best apple for making pies. However, if one wants to rectify a particular vitamin deficiency through diet, comparing apples and oranges, or even apples and bacon, becomes much more on-target. In this sense, recognizing an ethic common among the world religions *enables* us to identify differences between the religions. If it is true that, as Massey claims, "all the faith communities uphold the sacredness of the entire creation," and so that all world religions underwrite some form of environmental concern, then we can begin making salient comparisons regarding the diverse reasons and motivations behind, as well as the diverse end-goals envisioned for, the environmental care that religions do or may undertake.

On the other hand, if recognizing commonalities enables comparison, it also *limits* comparison. Comparing apples and oranges to rectify a particular vitamin deficiency will enable us to identify certain features, but not all, that differentiate the two fruits. Similarly, comparing religions around a shared feature (e.g., monotheism) may result in the identification of a number of differentiating features (e.g., trinitarianism vs. pantheism), but it cannot promise to identify all of them. The problem is that among these unrecognized differentiating features might be some that particular religions use to identify themselves *as* different from other religions. The familiar complaint about aspirations to find commonalities is that they occlude differences. I'd like to refine this complaint by suggesting that such aspirations occlude the recognition of differences to the same extent that they enable this recognition; aspirations to commonality cannot occlude all differences, but they can exclude particular differences as irrelevant because they are imperceptible from the vantage point of the commonality aspired to. Confronting this fact shapes the character of the task of understanding and appreciating differences. It should not consist merely in tracing those differences illuminated by the results of finding common features; rather, it should consist in plumbing the depths and traversing the breadths of the world religions in the attempt to find those differences that are occluded by the regnant concerns that direct current comparative projects.

I imagine that Massey would endorse this characterization of the task of understanding and appreciating differences, especially given his Dalit perspective. When Latin American liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez famously insisted that the problem of the non-believer needed to be replaced by the problem of the non-person, he contributed to global religious education in two ways, I believe. First, he claimed that focusing on one feature of the Christian tradition(s) – the conflicting interaction between religious and non-religious claims – forced to the periphery other, perhaps more faithful, features, such as concern for the downtrodden. Of course, Gutierrez was speaking from within and to his own faith community, but his work has comparative implications: *if* one compared the religions around the problem of the non-believer, *then* one might fail to see how the religions have addressed, or failed to address, the problem of the non-person. Again, comparisons not only enable, but also limit, the recognition of differences. I imagine certain comparative projects have failed and would fail to illuminate the differences that the Dalit perspective would make to the religious history of India, but it is beyond my competencies and experiences to state this conclusion definitively.

The second way that Gutierrez's insistence contributes to global religious education, and this has consequences for my own proposal, is that it offers a new point of comparison: setting aside the problem of the non-believer, religions can now be compared around the problem of the non-person. The proliferation of liberation perspectives from within the world religions makes such a comparative project viable. And this suggests something further about the task of understanding and appreciating differences: the identification of differences occluded by a prior aspiration to commonality may, in turn, enable a new and *different* aspiration to commonality that could give voice to the heretofore voiceless.

Thus, global religious education might well consist in the dialectic between finding common features and appreciating differences; each task enables the other, and when it is taken up again from the other, it must be done differently. Similarities and differences between religions would cease to function as fixed, static givens and instead appear as

flexible, shifting networks with the capacity to constantly surprise. Religious 'opponents' around one issue may be 'allies' around another. Something neither Massey nor I touch on is diversity *within* religions, which entails the probability that many of my own religious opponents and allies will be both within and outside my own faith community. As a Protestant, I expect to both disagree and agree with Catholics. A disagreement with a Catholic may align with an agreement with a Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu, and vice versa. The point of keeping the dialectic between finding commonalities and appreciating differences going is to prevent us from foreclosing possible alliances in advance. Comfort with religious opponents will be better achieved if, beyond tolerating differences, we recognize that the opposition doesn't go all the way down, that tomorrow we could be allies. In this way, global religious education *methodologically* enables reconciliation between faith communities. Perhaps it is no accident that Massey references the sacredness of the entire creation. All faith communities share the earth, and its capacity to sustain us all may come to depend on peaceable relations between the religions.

It is essential that the dialectic I am proposing not be understood as implying some inexorable progress in knowledge of and peace between the religions. I don't think Gutierrez intended to invalidate the problem of the non-believer, simply to highlight the neglected problem of the non-person. Proposed solutions to either problem may have ramifications for solutions to the other. After all, for many Christians, failure to recognize the personhood of the oppressed is intimately bound to a failure in belief, specifically the failure to have faith in a God who values those that humans fail to value. This is all by way of suggesting that, if global religious education shouldn't foreclose possible future alliances, it also shouldn't foreclose the possible future relevance of old debates between and within religions. The amount of knowledge required to leave open such possibilities is staggering. Deep historical appreciation must be matched with the breadth of contemporary influence. This can occur neither in an individual mind, nor in a single tradition. Again, global religious education *methodologically* requires cooperation between faith communities.

Massey notes that our world "is in such haste that the people are fast losing their bearing." The religions, too, are caught up in this sweeping bustle, constantly changing as they confront new perplexities and new versions of old perplexities. Only a global religious education that remains open and dynamic enough to keep up with such acceleration will be adequate. I think Massey will agree that this is a worthy ideal.