

# Beyond Tolerance to Communion

Pravina Rodrigues

**A**S A CATHOLIC WHO WAS BORN INTO a multireligious, multicultural context in Mumbai, I have always found both Islam and Hinduism mysteriously beautiful. From a young age I was privileged to experience peaceful relations with Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, yet I've also wrestled with questions of religious diversity. Science reminds us again and again that diversity is intrinsic to the natural world, but what about the diversity of religious belief? Is there one path to the Divine, or are there many? After completing my Bachelor's in Theology at St. Pius X Seminary in Mumbai, and my Master's in Theological Studies at the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, I decided to delve more deeply into this question by pursuing a PhD at the Graduate Theological Union, focusing on comparative theology and interreligious dialogue, with a particular emphasis on comparing Hindu and Christian theologies.

One of the first things I discovered is that the term *comparative theology* itself is a bit misleading. Theologians

do not compare to discover which religion is better but to be illumined by the religious "Other," while remaining rooted in their own traditions. Study of another religious tradition is neither a rejection of one's faith nor a dilution of its unique claims to truth. Instead, such study is an invitation to a deeper appreciation and understanding of oneself in relation with the Other. Just as in a marriage, self-understanding and growth takes place not in a vacuum but through engagement in activities, dialogue, and even disagreements with one's partner. The relationship acts as a catalyst for mutual illumination and growth.

**T**hanks to my advisor Professor Rita D. Sherma, I have further discerned that religions, particularly Hinduism and Christianity, are not—and do not need to be—commensurable and reconcilable; it is not necessary to view Christ as Krishna or the reverse. Although the differences between traditions may be significant, this does

not mean the Divine is exhausted by or present in *only one* religious tradition. I like to think of religions as colors, each with a beauty of its own that can neither be fully described nor compared to another. Studies that seek to examine multiple religions by creating a hierarchical structure that places one's own tradition on top are, arguably, biased. Moreover, we must be wary of comparisons that do disservice to the Other by creating hegemonic methodologies that "prove" the Other is inferior.

Most importantly, on this journey I have come to understand the difference between tolerance and understanding. If we engage only in interfaith activities geared towards juxtaposing religious texts and engaging in debate (or even dialogue), we may continue to find ourselves rooted in "us versus them" thinking that, at best, maintains a position of tolerance. I argue that the best way to move beyond tolerance is through communion. The word *communion* comes from the Latin meaning "sharing in common." I contend that

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a more authentic understanding of another faith tradition can take place only when we make an effort to see and experience another tradition from the inside. My understanding of such interfaith communion encompasses engagement in the intellectual, charitable, and devotional activities of the religious Other, so that one might experience the Divine through those activities and begin to see what the Other sees.

**T**his path of communion is much more than a simple sampling of another tradition in order to borrow whatever religious beliefs one may choose. True communion is not flirting with another tradition, but *committing* oneself deeply to the *whole* tradition with one’s heart, mind, and body. Not only does it require hard work and rigor, it requires integrity and humility.

I confess that my comparative theological endeavors have broadened my outlook in life while shaping



Pravina Rodrigues in the GTU library

my entire being. Like the famous theologian Raimon Pannikar, I contend that my current theological studies have helped me discover that I am Hindu without ever ceasing to be a Christian. Some may find this position syncretistic or relativistic, but it reflects the both/and philosophy that is fundamental to religious engagement in India and contradictory to the either/or philosophy of the West.

Finally, I thank God for my current position as office manager and program coordinator at the GTU’s Center for Dharma Studies. In this role I have had opportunity to engage the Hindu tradition in the area of service as well as theological study.

Such interreligious engagement challenges me to deepen my own beliefs. I am reminded of my Hindu friend Sonal Ranadive who once jokingly remarked, “People from your Church are looking for you. . . . They think you have gone too far.” My response to her echoes the words of J.R.R.Tolkien, “Not all who wander are lost.” ♦

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