

# Vice-Presidential Address

## *Speaking to Religious Hybridity*

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Good evening! It is an honor to speak to this auspicious group as your Vice-President and I am grateful to our President Kimberly Belcher for that very gracious introduction. I am honored by it. I am also amazed at the prescience of her focus on my article for the *Journal of Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology*.<sup>1</sup> It relates very much to what I want to reflect on tonight.

These Vice-Presidential addresses at our Annual Meetings seem to be a genre all their own. Not quite a theological lecture, but some theological rumination; an invitation to think about the work of this academy at this particular moment. So that is my modest goal. I will try to offer it while bearing in mind the widely ignored “presentation mantra” of the American Academy of Religion: “Be brief. Be witty. Be seated!” I won’t be entirely brief, and I’m unlikely to be very witty as I did not get my second cup of coffee until 6:30 this evening; but I will not go on forever and I will eventually sit down.

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Several Vice-Presidential addresses of recent years have asked this Academy at one level or another to consider what our scholarship has to offer a North American world that is *globalizing* and *pluralizing*. I am going to raise a question in the same vein, but with respect to *one particular phenomenon* that arises from the increasing religious plurality of the west—well documented by scholars like Diane Eck, among many others.<sup>2</sup> The form of plurality to which I want to draw attention is a species of the *overall* complexity of our liturgical assemblies to which I also want to say a word. But to state where I am going right up front: I wonder what we liturgical scholars can offer and can learn in the context of religious hybridity.

When I say hybridity, I am thinking here not just of a unitary phenomenon but one that is itself appropriately, *hybrid*. A whole range of hybridity, actually.

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1. James Farwell, “On Whether Christians Should Participate in Buddhist Practice: A Critical Autobiographical Reflection,” in *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* 1:2 (2017): 242-256.  
2. <https://pluralism.org/>

There is the basic *hybridity of religious consciousness* that is simply the awareness of the religious plurality around us. We engage our own practices with a particularly vivid awareness in the west, now, that others *practice differently*—an awareness that can reshape our experience of our own practices, intrigue us to explore, bring our practices into sharper relief, simply in our awareness that these practices of ours are not simply *given*.

There is also the hybridity of those who *engage in one tradition inescapably shaped by another*. Maybe they grew up in one tradition and now practice another. Maybe they are the children of an interreligious marriage—its own kind of hybridity.

There is then the hybridity of *those whose practice of one tradition is immeasurably deepened by the practices of another* ... who find that, say, Buddhist meditation has strengthened their capacity to attend to the Word of God through Scripture; or, say, that Sufi *dhikr* has deepened their practice of the Eucharist as remembrance.

And finally, some of those folks, more radically hybrid still, practice with the understanding *that they ARE both* Buddhist and Jew or Christian and Buddhist or Sufi and Christian.

These last two kinds of hybridity are of course what has come to be called (unfortunately, not succinctly) “multiple religious participation” and “multiple religious belonging.”

How can we both resource and learn from this range of religious hybridity that exists around us, within our congregations, and sometimes inside of us as individuals?

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Allow me, for the moment, to offer a few vignettes ... incomplete, all inviting further commentary if we had the time, all drawn just from my own experience, but perhaps enough for now to bring various forms of hybridity to flesh and to prompt your recollection of your own examples.

There is the woman in an Episcopal parish who faithfully attends every Sunday Eucharist among the 8 or 10 who come to the early service. She comes forward at the Eucharistic invitation and receives the priest’s blessing. She does not receive communion. As her priest got to know her, she discovered that she is not a member. She is, in fact, not baptized. She grew up in Pakistan, the daughter of a Muslim Father and a Roman Catholic Christian mother. She comes quietly to church each week because listening to the Scriptures and the sermon in a Christian church help her wrestle with a faith that is a searching hybrid of both her home traditions.

There is the man on the west coast who is studiously, religiously in fact, atheist. It is his all-encompassing worldview, carefully thought through. Which is not to say that he does not see value in various religious traditions. He is convinced of the Buddhist doctrine that all of us as selves interdependent, co-originating—*pratitya samutpada*. He comes to church every week because he loves what the practice does for his community. He is, by the way, the church's largest financial contributor, far and away, and has been for years.

There is the active member of the Episcopal Church and a member of one of the Sufi orders. He finds in Sufi practice an antiphon, if you will, to Christian contemplative prayer. The man is a priest and pastor of a parish.

There is the woman who sits weekly, on Wednesdays, with the local Rinzai Buddhist sangha and comes Sunday to the Eucharist. She doesn't mix and match the two traditions. She doesn't pretend that their approach to *ultimate concern* is the same thing. To the contrary, living in the dialectic between the two helps keep her nimble and resistant to turning religion itself into idolatry. Her Buddhist practices steadies her. Her Christian practice gives her hope.

There is the yoga teacher who is a member of the parish vestry. He is a lifelong Episcopalian who spends his weekdays guiding yoga practice, who when he talks about his experience of the ceremonial actions of Christian liturgy, makes compelling reference to the exercise of the "subtle body" to which one attends in yoga.

There is also the monk who, by his own account, came to Christ through years of practicing Zen Buddhism. He now makes art with the Johannine logos co-inscribed in the *enso*—the brush-stroked, incomplete circle of Zen.

Consider the Jewish political scientist who does *vajraguru* practice with the Tibetan Buddhists. His next book is on Gandharan ethics, which is to say, the ethics of Aristotle in relation to Mahayana Buddhism.

I could go on. In a context of religious plurality, the "holy envy" of traditions not our own—as Krister Stendahl called it—takes many forms, sometimes more than mere envy. Those who have read the stories of Bede Griffiths or Abishiktananda, or of the westerners who went to study with the Japanese Dominican Shigetu Oshida, may think of them as fascinating anomalies, as stories on the margins that occur elsewhere.

They are standouts to be sure, but they are less and less anomalous, and their stories unfold not just across the world from us but right here, increasingly, in North America.

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To those who think the rise of conscious religious hybridity in the west is a rather niche thing as a candidate for the attention of this academy, I commend the essays in *Many Yet One?: Multiple Religious Belonging*, put out by the World Council of Churches in 2016.<sup>3</sup> John Thatamanil’s “Eucharist Upstairs, Yoga Downstairs” is a particularly good essay in that book, and there are others. Around about 2018, some corner got turned, and studies of religious hybridity, including multiple religious participation and belonging in the west, truly exploded such that it is now difficult even to keep up with field. Because the varied phenomenon of hybrid religious practice and understanding has *itself* exploded—beyond our conventional ways of counting heads in the religious bodies represented in this room.

Of course *religious* hybridity is not the only one that figures into our liturgical contexts. We are all multiple, we all contain multitudes, we are all like Whitman. We are intersectional if you’d rather. We practice religiously in a context where culture and race and ethnicity and economy and gender and more come to bear. But I want to focus here on *religious* hybridity, because—well—it is my address, and it is a matter of personal interest! ... and because I think it matters for us to attend to this in our context.

Let me take a moment to set this phenomenon within the complexity of our liturgical assemblies with which we are already familiar. Because, I fear, our use of the term “assembly” so often in the singular may conceal as much as it reveals. In *Christian* theology post Vatican II, for example, we commonly think now of the assembly itself as the primary sign of the *missio Dei*, the sign of Christ, convened in a world itself marked by—just to give protestants equal time here—what Graham Hughes calls the diffused sacramentality of the creative Word of God; an assembly in which the condensed sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist sustain the assembly as it encounters the Holy Other. Fair enough, absolutely right, and absolutely central to our Christian liturgical and sacramental theology. But we also all know that no liturgical assembly is just one thing. If there are 100 people in the assembly in synagogue or church, 100 people at Friday prayers at the mosque, there are people in 100 different places—spiritually, developmentally, practically, pastorally, formationally. They come with different histories, different traumas. They have made different choices, and different happenings have befallen them. Some of them have been touched by religious traditions different from the ones they find themselves in now. I am not sure whether Jewish or Muslim communities think of their assemblies in quite the same singular way—my colleagues in those traditions can say—but I suspect, being composed of human beings, that Jewish assemblies and Muslim assemblies and others show some of the same complexity, even if they think of the assembly somewhat differently than in Christian sacramental theology. And in terms of religious complexity, certainly

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3. Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar and Joseph Prabhakar Dayam, eds., *Many Yet One?: Multiple Religious Belonging* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2016).

there has been a long and rich dialogue between Jewish and Buddhist practitioners in the US; and certainly the controversy in some Islamic communities about Sufism is not *just* over the hermeneutical approach to the Quran but also over the openness of some Sufi schools to the Beloved being manifested in and beyond all religious traditions. I do wonder whether there is a way in Christian sacramental theology for us to expand our language around the sign-force of the assembly to take better theological account of its complex constitution. That is an address for another time. But the religious hybridity that interests me is simply another feature, a growing feature, of the assembly's complexity in the west.

There are some who question the stronger forms of hybridity like multiple religious participation or multiple religious belonging. Some theorists of religion, postcolonialists and critical modernists in particular, view the category of "religion" to be a fiction anyway, something imposed upon fluid forms of life by western imperialism, mostly by Christianity. Religions just are hybrid anyway, they say—what's the fuss? Some may challenge this kind of religious hybridity from the other end of concern, as so-called syncretism; or something that risks infidelity to one's own tradition. Despite our recent learning of how entangled the notion of syncretism is with racism—as we see in Ross Kane's work,<sup>4</sup> for example—the challenge to how one can practice two religions at once does have some force, especially for the Abrahamic traditions.

There is a middle position that I operate from, one that sees these traditions marked by a bounded porosity,<sup>5</sup> even as practitioners do experience them to be living and developing *wholes* that are different from one another in their totality, even if resonant in some ways, and borrowing from one another in some ways. It is from that position, whose defense I could offer some other time, from which I proceed here. We could leave this to the theologians of religion or to the systematicians, but in my experience, it is at the level of *practice* where the most interesting forms of this religious hybridity are lived. *The people in this room know something about practice, about the theologies of practice, about practices as formative, and formation for practice.* I'd love for more of us to bring to bear more of what we know on this experience of hybrid practice.

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How could we begin, as liturgical scholars, to engage the whole range of religious hybridity in which our people are increasingly involved? Here are just a couple of reflections on our response as liturgists to liturgical hybridity. They are not so

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4. Ross Kane, *Syncretism and Christian Tradition: Race and Revelation in the Study of Religious Mixture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

5. For this concept in use see Robert S. Heaney, "Public Theology and Public Missiology," in *Anglican Theological Review* 102:2 (Spring 2020): 201-212. See also Farwell, op cit., 248-250.

much original as they are an invitation to revisit and rethink in the face of this significant shift in western religiosity.

For starters, there would be great benefit to all if we simply entered into more sustained reflection with our religious others about each other's liturgy, ritual, scripted prayer. Of course, interreligious dialogue focusing on doctrine has been going on for a long time. So has what Roman Catholics call the dialogue of experience, especially between monks of the east and the west. There, dialogue has often been about the contours of monastic life, and about meditation and mental prayer. But there sometimes liturgy pops up. It has to. Because the eastern monks sit in the stalls with the western monks in their offices, and the western monks sit in the room with the eastern monks as they do their meditation rituals. Sometimes it is ritual practice and sometimes ritual space and within it in which it occurs that becomes a point of mutual learning. I am thinking of a moment the second Gethsemani encounter. Amid the polite formalities of the meeting, Norman Zuckers, an American Buddhist of Jewish lineage, looked up at the crucifix and asked his Roman Catholic hosts, "*Why do you find the iconography of the crucifix, with the figure of Jesus hanging off the cross, inspiring?*"

Sharon Salzberg who was also there, reported:

Norman's question, because it was so sincere (and one could feel that), broke open the dialogue. People started talking about suffering, about suffering that has nowhere to go, about suffering that doesn't have an easy fix or any fix at all. We started talking about love, about unfathomable love, about love being the only thing that could meet that depth of suffering. It turned into an extraordinary conversation.<sup>6</sup>

The same Norman Fischer who asked the question about the crucifix in the liturgical space was absolutely mystified at how the Christian monks could make of the psalms—passionate and violent and full of change and struggle as well as praise and thanksgiving—the center of their daily liturgical practice. He sat with them as they prayed, every day. He asked them how this practice *meant* for them. Their answers taught him so much that he found himself reading again the Psalms of his original faith and retranslating the Psalms through Zen eyes.<sup>7</sup> It is a lovely book.

Fischer's experience with the psalms presses a point. No one knows better than the members of this academy how the meaning of liturgy is *in its doing*. Understanding the ritual is also important, and second-order reflection on its meaning is crucial to catechesis. But if its first meaning is in its doing, and we want to understand what is happening in the rituals of others, then it means we will need more often to be guests in the traditions of others, perhaps going beyond simple

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6. <https://onbeing.org/blog/the-mysterious-junction-of-suffering-and-love/>

7. Norman Fischer, *Opening to You: Zen-Inspired Translations of the Psalms* (New York: Penguin Compass, 2003).

observation with the permission of our hosts. Each tradition will have their own constraints around what they can participate in and what they can invite others to participate in. Sometimes the guest learns from the host. Sometimes the host from the guest. Sometimes the hosting and guesting is changing and dynamic as I learned again from a forthcoming essay by our colleague Martha Moore-Keish on Christian Eucharist and Hindu Prasad.<sup>8</sup>

An ironic example of this dance of hybridity in practice and understanding and mutual learning: some Zen Buddhists in North America consider ritual a distraction, a leftover of East Asian religiosity. They *tolerate* the ritual aspects of a Buddhist meeting. This view is set so deep I was recently asked by a Buddhist roshi to offer a dharma talk—itself a liturgical act—in his sangha about ritual, what it does, and why one does it, and the fact that they were doing it, even if they thought they were “just meditating.” They received it well in this case. But the exchange arose from a Christian participating in Buddhist liturgy, teaching about liturgy from Christian and Jewish scholarship using Buddhist terms, for the sake of the Buddhist appreciating more deeply what they were doing in their own rites. The guest of the sangha, then for a time the host of the sangha. Of course, I happen to be a particular kind of hybrid Buddhist-Christian—more on that in a moment—which allowed me to take the role that I did.

Participating in the liturgical acts of others has always been controversial, even *verboden* for some for good reasons. It is not without risk, precisely because we take the rituals seriously. Great care and respect is always required to navigate the waters of participant observation in traditions not our own. But doing liturgy and talking about liturgy, we know, are not the same thing. If it is in liturgical action that the religious other enacts the horizons under which they live and discern and experience their lives. Is it not time for us to revisit the best practices, protocols, and a *theology* for such cross-participation for the sake of sharing what we know and learning what we don’t? For the sake of becoming ever more literate in the worlds that are enacted in the rituals of the other? This would also help us understand what sort of formation is happening among those who in our own congregations participate in more than one tradition. We might, in the process, receive light on the question I have heard Hindu scholar Anant Rambachan ask: “What is the meaning of my neighbor’s faith for my own?”

Secondly, might liturgists resource the drafting of liturgical materials that do not *ignore* the religious other whom we meet, nor treat them as objects of conversion, but acknowledge and pray *within our own liturgies* for the practitioners of other religious traditions? This liturgical act itself hybridizes our identity in relation to those for whom we pray. We become members of a cultural commons or deepen

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8. Martha Moore-Keish, “Who Is Hosting Whom? Guest-host Relations in Eucharist and Prasad,” forthcoming.

our sense of it. And then at the very center of our own liturgies lives not only an awareness but a service to the other. What if we prayed for the health and vitality of other religious communities? Might the hybrid consciousness accompanying such liturgical acknowledgement of the religious other make us more open to the wonder of God's diverse revelation? This has been done—but most of our communities don't.

Speaking from my own tradition, it was in 1928 that the prayer for Jews and others as infidels disappeared from the American *Book of Common Prayer*. It has taken almost another 100 years for us—just this past summer in fact—to see a further revision of the Solemn Collects of Good Friday where Jews do not just disappear—which one could say is a slightly more benign form of the same attitude—but offers the following new form:

Let us pray for the Jewish people, who by the grace of their eternal covenant with God were delivered from bondage into freedom;  
 For their continued faithfulness;  
 For their flourishing in peace as witnesses to God's sustaining love;  
 For their safety from all malice and harm;  
 For their liberation from all forms of antisemitism and hatred;  
 For the fullness of redemption for the sake of God's Name;  
 That unity and concord may exist between Jews and Christians, in obedience to God's will.

We were not the first Anglican province to make this sort of change in our Good Friday Liturgy, but it is relatively recent for us all.

SimonMary Ahiokai, a Roman Catholic scholar, speaks in his writing of a town in midwestern Nigeria where the Roman Catholic parish offers prayers for the success and flourishing of their Muslim and indigenous religious neighbors. I find this deeply commendable. What benefits might be wrought by such prayers for one another, offered routinely, in the liturgies of our tradition? Ahiokai goes a bit farther still toward hybrid practice. Drawing from several Roman Catholic sources and the Jewish philosopher Levinas, for whom ethics arises from the claim that our neighbors lay on us *as other*, Ahiokai suggests "that texts of other religious traditions be constitutive elements of the Liturgy of the Word for all sacramental celebrations." He argues that at their liturgical source and summit, Christians are practicing being for others, and there is no stronger way to do this than to invite the religious other into the very center of our practice.<sup>9</sup>

There are many questions to put to such a proposal. Beyond the theological ground from which he makes this argument, and speaking as a Christian acutely

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9. SimonMary Ahiokai, "Making Way for Comparative Theology in the Liturgy of the Word: In Dialogue with James L. Fredericks," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 53:4 (Fall 2018): 499-519.



aware of my tradition's history, how would the texts of others be brought into a *Christian* liturgy of the Word without being just another Christian colonization of my neighbor's alterity?

Still, I find myself wondering, in response to Ahiokai's proposal, whether Christians could invite Muslims and Jews to practice Scriptural reasoning at the liturgy of the Word. "Scriptural reasoning" is that method for religious others to gather and read one another's Scriptures in one another's company, without the intention to convert or to argue, but simply to see and hear the shared texts differently. What would it be like, similarly for Muslims to invite Jews and Christians, or Jains or Sikhs, into a practice of Scriptural reasoning within the context of Salat, or adjacent to it? Might hearing from the sacred texts of other traditions right in the midst of practicing our own deepen our capacity for the fresh surprise of encountering God in the other? Might the guesting and hosting that arise there bring its own formation? Might our liturgical celebrations, to all our benefit, reflect the religious differences that mark our world not just as demographic fact but as *possible site of epiphany*?

Finally, of course there is the hybridity of dual religious practitioners. How do we resource them and learn from them? From those who participate conscientiously in more than one tradition, I can only offer my own experience *as* such a dual practitioner. This is not special pleading. I am perfectly happy to hear challenge to the coherence of this practice. I can raise them to myself. As Ruben Habito recently said, being both Christian and Buddhist—which he is—is a koan he has not yet solved.<sup>10</sup> I, too, am such a koan. I simply tell my story because it is what I know from the inside about dual practice.

I can't tell the whole story here. Suffice to say my own hybridity was seeded in me by my grandmother, who was as much my caregiver through my school age and teen years as my parents were. Born and raised on a chicken farm in Kentucky, with an 8th grade education, she attended church with us on the Principal Feast days. Otherwise she spent her days in the garden, her nights caring for very sick children, and the rest of the time reading the gospels, the Psalms, the Bhagavadgita, the Upanishads, and the very peculiar writings of the Theosophical society. She read Pearl S. Buck and listened to Mahalia Jackson. She was a baptized Christian and a seeker before the term got popular.

It was her imprint on me, I now know, that made me able, years later, at a time of personal crisis, to say yes to an invitation to sit with the Soto Zen Buddhists in Atlanta—something I sort of stumbled into while reading Dogen's *Shobogenzo*

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10. Habito is a Catholic, founding teacher of the Maria Kannon Zen Center, Dallas, and a prolific and thoughtful writer on Zen and Christian spirituality and practice. He made this remark at his retirement at the meeting of the Society of Buddhist-Christian Studies in 2024.

with John Fenton at Emory University. I am still sitting 30 years later. I eventually took the Buddhist precepts on a research trip in Japan. Zen practice so reshaped something in me that needed reshaping, that I kept going.

What does that have to do with my topic? Just this: seven years after that first experience with Soto Zen practice, I wrote a dissertation under Don Saliers that involved a nondualist interpretation of suffering and salvation, of brokenness and wholeness, in the liturgies of the Sacred Triduum. Mind you, I don't think I used the term nondual in the book. I'm quite certain Don and I never had any conversations about Zen Buddhism. I had rather forgotten by then a couple of papers I'd given a few years earlier comparing Christianity and Buddhism in reference to a critique of modernity. And it was years after the book was published before I realized that the nondualism of my Buddhist practice is what allowed me to catch the nondualism at work in the liturgies centered on cross and resurrection. Not the same kind of nondualism. But it is indeed a nondualism and it took traveling an unfamiliar road to see what was right under my nose—to see it truly, but also to see it differently.

The moral of that story, I hope—since I am not nearly so special as to be unique—is that dual practitioners may actually be a resource to us in working out the liturgical meanings of our own tradition. We know that liturgical practice shapes us. Those in our congregations engaged in dual practice or dual belonging may have gifts with which to resource us in our own experience of liturgy and prayer and liturgical theology.

Maybe it all works like this because, Perry Schmidt-Leukel is right: that all of our religious traditions are composed of repertoire of patterns of practice and belief that replicate themselves both across the diversity of our religious traditions and also within them.<sup>11</sup> And that what constitutes the differences among these traditions would then be the way they arrange those patterns, which are major and minor themes, how often they appear, how they are assembled into wholes greater than sums of the parts. Maybe that's why we are returned more deeply to the wisdom of our own tradition by drinking from the wells of another.

Or, maybe we just see better when we look through the lens of difference.

Well, time to conclude. I hope that I have gotten you thinking about the challenge of resourcing and learning from the range of religious hybridity that emerges from our plural context, even if you don't think any of my ideas for facing that challenge make any sense. I don't know that I am right about these strategies, but I know I am right that the members of this academy cannot ignore this hybridity. I

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11. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology: The Gifford Lectures* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2017).

think we must, in this environment, expand our theorizing of the liturgical act to account for this hybridity. If the world is sacramental, as Christians put it, then I think we must think about the sacramentality, or the revelatory quality, if you prefer, of other religious traditions, and figure out how to do so without reducing all the traditions to dim versions of our own.

A final note: I love this academy. I have good friends and colleagues here who have funded and enriched my thinking over the years. But I also think that we must rejoin the effort to make this academy as religiously diverse as possible. I know that is not a new conversation. But we are still very Christian, a little Jewish, and I don't know if the Muslim visitors we had a few years ago have stayed. But the diversity of this academy is a topic I hope we might revisit with fresh energy at some point this coming year.

Thank you again for the privilege of speaking to you and thank you for listening.