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# Response to Dr. Catherine Cornille’s Lecture on “Religious Hybridity: Promise or Problem?”

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Thank you, Dr. Cornille, for your lecture on religious hybridity, and for your framing of tonight’s discussion of Christian identity. I have been an ordained Christian elder since 1992, and I am a newly minted Sempai, a Teacher and senior student in the Zen and Vajrayana traditions of Buddhism, authorized to teach what my Repa Bushi Yamato Damashii calls “BodhiChristo,” a concept which we are developing together, since we both came to Buddhism with no intention of leaving Jesus behind. I am obviously still in process of becoming Buddhist but not less so in process of becoming a Christian after all these years, because I resonate with what Maya Angelou said, when a friend told her he had become a Christian and she replied, “Already?”<sup>1</sup> In her question she echoed the sentiment of our slave fore-parents who sang, “Lord, I Want to Be a Christian in My Heart,” not as a precursor to a grand moment of conversion but in humble, honest recognition of the difficulties of following the way of Christ. I am becoming what I am becoming. Describing this is the basis of my witness and ongoing academic and devotional work which I have titled, “The Way, The Wheel, and The Cross: Towards a Womanist Phenomenology of Interreligiosity.”

To some extent, I saw myself in what you said, as a westerner and as one in process of “becoming” a Christian, unfathomably steeped in the philosophy of individualism and the ways I am compelled to live that out as a Black, Womanist, spiritually eclectic, liberation theologian trying to make sense of what I consider to be a “hijacked faith.” I say that Christianity is a hijacked faith because of the ways in which white Protestant Evangelicalism—the template for American civil religion—reinforces and is reinforced by individualism, compelling individual conversion, prescribing individual piety as the marker of Christian witness via the hermeneutics of sacrifice, and conspicuously, relentlessly, *decentering* the requirements that all human beings have, and that Jesus affirmed, which are these: to live in evermore just societies and in evermore spiritual communion. This is why, historically, the forced or involuntary conversions to Christianity notwithstanding, the Black Church has been unparalleled in engaging the powers,

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1. See, for example, her generous 2002 interview with Nelson González, “On the Way Up,” *Third Way* 25, no. 10 (December 2002), 18-22.

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I say that Christianity is a hijacked faith because of the ways in which white Protestant Evangelicalism—the template for American civil religion—reinforces and is reinforced by individualism, compelling individual conversion, prescribing individual piety as the marker of Christian witness via the hermeneutics of sacrifice, and conspicuously, relentlessly, *decentering* the requirements that all human beings have, and that Jesus affirmed, which are these: to live in evermore just societies and in evermore spiritual communion.

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a model to other nations while navigating its own violent context of founding, awakening, revivalist, modern, postmodern, post-liberal America, simultaneously embracing Jesus’ unquestioned ethic of love.

Thus, in the 1970s, the late Dr. James Cone’s question, “How do I remain black and Christian?” and his rejection of traditional religious authority—namely, white Protestant Evangelicalism—were not predicated on ahistorical hubris or postmodern arrogance or pretension. The question and the trend in Black and subsequently Womanist theology toward de-traditioning were not outgrowths of the New Age movement but rather emerged distinctly from the African American community’s ongoing need for justice in the face of white supremacist violence, which white people’s presumed Christianity never contravened.

The involuntary conversions to Christianity in largely Catholic Caribbean and Latin America and the penchant of the imported Africans and their descendants for maintaining traditional beliefs "alongside" their Christianity begs the question of whether the hybridity in their worship and rituals—when it centers justice and love of community—is more authentically Christian than white Protestant Evangelicalism that morally levels individuals and brokers in social, political, economic, and gender-based violence. This is the source of my dis-ease when Christians go to a place such as Haiti and try to Christianize an already Christian country.

This work of deconstructing Evangelicalism and its influence on my thinking, worshipping, acting, and understanding of mission is not only a consequence of my learning deeply from my teachers Dr. Cone (1938-2018) and the premier Womanist theologian, Dr. Delores S. Williams (b. 1937). It also arises from the fact that I was not initially reared in the Church and have persistently sought to find language to describe what I experience in my absolute awe of nature, my compassionate desire to ease my own and others' suffering, and my deep longing and intention to work for justice, peace, love, and joy.

This is partly why I resonated deeply with Devaka Premawardhana's understanding that hybrid identity is unremarkable or redundant, because all theology is human work and wherever we are we learn from each other how to signify what we are experiencing of the divine reality or divine accompaniment.<sup>2</sup> We revise, and re-tell, the story. I easily recognize the ancient Egyptian or African sources of Christian hybridity in the framing of Jesus' story and in subsequent theological framing by numerous North African church fathers and mothers: Origen of Alexandria, Cyprian of Carthage, Tertullian of Carthage, Perpetua of Carthage, Anthony of Egypt, and Augustine of Numidia and Hippo Regius. It is well-nigh impossible to assess the impact of Augustine's well-known, nine-year dalliance with Manichaeism on his subsequent development of a hybrid Christian anthropology and eschatology. There is an irony in Christian exclusivism that does not recognize this.

Again, not having been initially raised in the Church, I found myself as a child full of the Spirit, looking for language to describe what I was experiencing as perhaps a divine touch, to use anachronistically and characteristically Christian language, and Christianity happened to be the first language I learned for the Spirit, through an encounter with Scripture that I was able to read and understand; and shortly after, led by the Spirit, like a latter day Thecla, I baptized myself at age eight. This first invitation to consider the holy things via Scripture was not to be my last. It was not until I was a teenager that I encountered the revivalist Black Church and its dogmatic persuasions derived from white Protestant Evangelicalism but by then my spirituality was more formed than I knew and I could never quite affirm everything that I was hearing! I just knew that nothing would excite my

2. Devaka Premawardhana, "The Unremarkable Hybrid: Aloysius Pieris and the Redundancy of Multiple Religious Belonging," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46:1 (Winter 2011), 76-101.

## The penchant of the imported Africans and their descendants for maintaining traditional beliefs "alongside" their Christianity begs the question of whether the hybridity in their worship and rituals...is more authentically Christian than white Protestant Evangelicalism that morally levels individuals and brokers in social, political, economic, and gender-based violence.

imagination the way that the religious and spiritual questions I had formulated as a child had. But when I was a teenager, the words of a particular song we sang in the revivalist Black Church caught my attention and demonstrated the hybrid nature of black religious thought.

Long ago, I didn't know nothing about Jesus  
and His love  
I had heard about Him, but I had never felt  
This manna which comes down from above  
In this life of sin I could no longer stand  
I asked my mother how do you get to know the man  
She said you must be, don't you see you've got to be ...  
Born again  
You must have that fire and Holy Ghost  
That Burning churning keeps the prayer wheel turning  
The kind of religion you cannot conceal  
It makes you move, makes you shout  
Makes you cry when it's real  
I've got my hand right in the windin' chain  
My souls been anchored in my Jesus' name  
I'm filled within, I've free from sin  
You know I've been born again  
I started to walk, I had a new walk  
I started to talk, I had a new talk  
I looked at my hands, my hands looked new  
I looked at my feet and they did too  
I've got my hand right in the windin' chain  
My souls been anchored in my Jesus' name  
I'm filled within, I've free from sin  
You know I've been born again.<sup>3</sup>

3. Titles and lyrics vary slightly, depending on the recording artist. The many covers include Mahalia Jackson, Mildred Howard, and Sam Cooke.

And I would ask, "What is a prayer-wheel? What does it mean to have your hand in the winding chain?" And no one could answer me. No one knew what they were or when or how these came into the stream of consciousness of black religious thought. Some thought these might have been a reference to Masonic imagery. I learned later that these are also implements of Buddhist worship and this, for me, was a profound reminder of African American people's penchant for religious hybridity.

The question of how to end suffering took on deeper meaning for me as I began to recognize, as a young adult up until now, as a seasoned Black, Womanist theologian, the insidiousness of the strictures of religious individualism and Christian exclusivism on our consciousness, such that we cannot imagine ourselves free to be with others as they go to God—or go within—to find a Way to justice, joy, peace, and love, freedom from violence, and freedom from the terrors of the strictures of mortality. Yet this is precisely what Jesus and the Buddha did. They accompanied the poor and vulnerable and made them less poor and less vulnerable, by situating them in communities, and by giving them and us templates for treating all persons with the dignity, compassion, and justice that we know that they and we ourselves require. This is what we should privilege and not our doctrinal certainties that are demonstrably theoretical and altogether speculative. For example, the affirmation of Jesus' suffering as a vicarious sacrifice is not for me the *sine qua non* of Christian identity but I do not wish to litigate that here.<sup>4</sup> The upshot of Christianity's or any other religion's tendency to regard itself as the only or final revelation is that huge numbers of humankind can never imagine a God who is free to be other than our significations.

God is inexhaustibly a mystery, the most interesting subject in the world, to whom and to *which* I am drawn, both as a scholar and as a devotee. So, the traditions and Scriptures that lured me with their stories, including the Prime and New Testaments, the Mahabharata, the Bhagavad Gita, the Dhammapada, the Qur'an, and others—all these I experienced as invitations to consider—not circumscribe—the nature of God; to find within them the moral impetus to consider the poor, to marshal what Katie Cannon called "the necessary soul" to fight for their survival and liberation, and to realize that, for even this life, for even this life, there are multiple sources of what Cornel West calls "subversive joy."<sup>5</sup> Thank you.

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4. See JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African American Experience* (Wipf & Stock, 2005).

5. See Cornel West, "Subversive Joy and Revolutionary Patience in Black Christianity," published variously, including in *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion & Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 161-165. See Katie Geneva Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Letty Russell, editor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1985), 30-40.