

Do not hold on to me: Resurrection as a basis for an unsteady dance

Basically, what I'm going to argue is that Resurrection is a very fruitful basis for thinking about the challenge of interreligious engagement –

And it's fruitful *precisely because* it reflects the unsteadiness of the enterprise – that is, it's not a neat resolution which enables us to know exactly where we stand, in relation to our own tradition or in relation to religious diversity, but is rather an inbuilt earthquake-event, which calls steady-ground into question

And its unsteadiness therefore *resources* us very well, for engaging at the frontiers – both the frontiers in how we see ourselves, and the frontiers of encounter with others

And the metaphor of dance is very pertinent – in fact, I'll be showing some images by Indian Christian artist, Jyoti Sahi, a self-identifying 'nonconformist Catholic',¹ whose paintings often focus on dance, inspired by the encounter between Hindu traditions and Christianity.

Interestingly, Sahi wrote this – 'the mission of Jesus, as I have tried to picture it, has been like a joyous dance, as though ... he sent his troupe of dancers out to the ends of the world, inviting people to the festival, and dance, of new creation.'

He goes on, 'Everywhere in Indian art we see the forms of dancing figures. The very essence of art, according to Indian aesthetics, is Anandam, or Joy. The dancing body is the liberated body. Those who are sad and oppressed do not feel like dancing.'²

I think I would add that dance can also express other emotions and experience – tragedy, lament, desire, yearning for change, dreaming of something new, but even so, seeing dance as integral to the gospel and its life in the world is a helpful image for us as we explore interreligious engagement.

Along the way, then, we're also going to dance through some questions about the nature of Christian particularity or distinctiveness, questions of the nature of truth, and some specific insights arising from Hindu-Christian engagement and finally from womanism, to highlight the political challenge, especially the question of who is being addressed and who is silent and whose insights are centred – so let's take some first steps.

First, though, the title of the conference obviously begs a particular question – have we hired the dance group Diversity, and we're all going to get a chance to be thrown dramatically through the air?

Unfortunately not, though the fact that their 2021 Bafta Awards routine caused controversy, actually speaks quite well to an aspect of what I want to say, notably the political dimension – because there were many complaints from the TV audience, accusing them of bringing politics into entertainment and even being racist against white people – though thankfully the regulator rejected the complaints, because entertainment is often political – but what of this notion that addressing racism against black people is somehow racist against white people?

It reflects the sensitivities (or distortions) in contrasting approaches to identity politics. We can apply this to interreligious engagement – where some Christians can be unsettled by anything which challenges Christian triumphalism; or when certain kinds of Christian distinctiveness are

¹ See <http://www.sojourn-arts.com/blog/2020/10/7/jesus-as-dancer-jyoti-sahis-lord-of-creation>

² Jyoti Sahi, *Stepping Stones: Reflections on the theology of Indian Christian culture*, 75–76

questioned, it's assumed people are rejecting the whole of Christian faith – whereas the reality is that any tradition is in a constant state of negotiating its own identity, with internal & external power dynamics, & at the heart of this, it's not so much about *whether* to affirm Christian particularity, but what *kind* of particularity: self-contained or something more fluid.

We'll come back to this, but crucially, hopefully it's becoming clear that when we think about interreligious encounter and engagement, this is not merely about abstract truths and negotiating them, and deciding who wins – but is about being alert to other dynamics at play, which again, the resurrection may help to illuminate.

So, let's turn back to the resurrection

I've written elsewhere about it being an under-the-radar dance lesson.³ So what did I mean? It's under the radar, because it actually happens in the quiet of the early morning – it's not a universal experience, invading the consciousness of everyone, everywhere, but is subtle even, unnoticed, and even those who encounter it, aren't sure what they've encountered – we're told they experience 'fear and amazement', in Mark's gospel, not quite computing what it is; and in each of the gospels, there's a sense that people can't recognise what's going on – so it's under the radar, not only for most people, in most places, but even for those who encounter it, it's also somehow under the radar of their meaning-making.

As a very poor dancer, this is why I also see it as a dance lesson: it's such a new experience, that it's like trying to learn new steps, even a new rhythm, in the midst of the world that has conditioned us not to see that way or move that way.

We can't easily process it, or step into it – it will take time – and even now, even centuries later, we're still torn between the old world, where our bodies mostly live, and the world of resurrection, where the dance is quite strange yet liberating.

Sahi's painting, called both the Sign of Jonah and Resurrection,⁴ reflects this strangeness, perhaps; a bundle of images which we have to interpret, as we find our way between Good Friday and Easter – with women at the tomb but also at the cross, a tree of life, and more.

But then we also have John chapter 20, where the Lord of this strange dance says to his prospective dance-partner, Mary, 'Do not hold on to me'.

If we're trying to learn a new rhythm, the thing we'd probably quite like to do, is hold on to someone who gets it, but he says 'Don't'.

Don't hold on to the teacher and trailblazer, but somehow learn the routine and join the dance.

Resurrection, then, becomes at the very least a very stimulating basis for thinking about interreligious dancing, precisely because, at the heart of the challenge, and the gift, of whatever's going on in an encounter, there is an impulse not to hold on –

But wait a minute – what shouldn't we be holding on to?

As every preacher will tell us, the answer is always Jesus – which means, in this case, don't hold on to Jesus. Which feels very counter-intuitive.

³ Graham Adams (2022) *Holy Anarchy: Dismantling domination, Embodying community, Loving strangeness*, London: SCM, p.208

⁴ See <http://jyotiartashram.blogspot.com/2007/10/sign-of-jonas.html>

If we're in a new situation, which Jesus has even made possible, and this new situation is unsettling because of its newness, its strangeness, its difficulty to recognise and navigate, surely the thing we want to do, as Christian disciples, is hold on to Jesus – but he says no.

It could mean 'let go entirely', or perhaps just 'loosen your grip' – as in Meister Eckhart's affirmation, 'I pray God he make me free of God' – in other words, we have to find ways of loosening our grip on those things, those ideas, which *seem* like God but which might actually be idols; because even when we hold on to Christ, it might be our own Christology which we're grasping, our own *notion* of Christ, rather than Christ as such.⁵

And perhaps *particularly* in a new scenario, like resurrection, we might be tempted to bring with us the notions that we knew from the old world, and grip those very tightly, in the midst of our anxiety ... which is perhaps something we see in the US, as people who want to Make America Great *Again*, somehow bring their idols from an old world, and reassert them in *this* world.

But back to this moment, here – and a reference to the distinction I use between **two kinds of truth**, which I borrow from Andrew Shanks and adapt slightly⁶ – because perhaps this reflects the tension between different ways of 'holding' Jesus –

On the one hand, truth-in-hand is the more common kind of truth, where people make assertions which they believe to be definitive, as though grasping something in their hand, clasped and contained; which is a notion of truth which has value, but which can be interpreted or expressed in different ways – both in a cherished kind of way, as though to preserve and care for what we hold, and in more competitive, even potentially violent ways, weaponizing what we hold and over-asserting it out of a desire for control – but in each case, there's inevitably some editing, as what we grasp becomes cut off from a wider network of angles and possibilities –

So **the second kind of truth** is actually the higher kind of truth, which Shanks calls truth-as-openness, but I call truth-in-process, which involves the more risky approach of opening out our hand, or what we grasp or claim, in order to allow the connections between it and other things to come to light, & fostering empathy. While it may look as though we take our truth less seriously, because we risk whatever might happen to it by opening up, actually it's about the recognition that whatever we hold, or assert, can never be the whole, and might actually be an idol. It takes things *more* seriously, by *not* editing their potential connections with other things

And it's this second kind of truth which is more like the very truth of the gospel, its risk, its scandalous generosity-of-spirit, its capacity to make connections where we may prefer to be closed down to our neighbours. But we convert the dance of this kind of truth, into a much more manageable dance, holding firmly to the notions we have, no matter how much truth we might have edited to get there – so we even hear the words 'Do not hold on to me', and we hold the words very tightly; or we encounter the empty tomb, and we grasp it, seeing its darkness as light, rather than allowing ourselves to be destabilised by the encounter with emptiness; or we assert the resurrection as the very thing which ties up all the loose ends of our faith, the neat resolution, whereas actually it is far more unsettling than that, a new rhythm we can't recognise

So we make the particularities of our religious tradition into something to 'hold on to', converting the expansive graciousness of truth-in-process into something much more like truth-in-hand

⁵ This is something we see even in the more traditional thinking of Lesslie Newbigin in *The Finality of Christ* (1969)

⁶ Adams, *Holy Anarchy*, p.37ff

But am I merely saying that we should be more easygoing, live and let live, less worried about what makes our faith distinctive? No, I believe I'm saying something else

Let me see if this helps -

Jenny Daggers helpfully distinguishes between two kinds of interaction with diversity⁷ –

'Christianity transcended' is like entering into Christianity but in effect treating it as a bridge out of itself, transcending what is distinctive within it by looking for the connections with others; an admirable desire, but it too easily overlooks what makes each tradition distinctive. Pluralism can often be like this, hastily finding connection and downplaying what is genuinely particular.

On the other hand, 'Christianity re-centred' is about encountering difference, and allowing it to help us revisit our own tradition, perhaps discovering things we'd overlooked previously, or even potentially borrowing insights from other traditions such that our own tradition's centre becomes a slightly renewed version of itself, as when Asian traditions encounter each other and receive from each other. Daggers prefers this second kind; it reminds us that our own tradition remains distinctive, but at the same time, it doesn't stay static – a truth but in process, if you like

Ironically, it can *look* as though 'Christianity *transcended*' is all about openness and what I called truth-in-process, but actually it can reflect a particular version of truth-in-hand, grasping its own sense that religions are broadly, universally, doing the same thing, and not allowing itself to be troubled by the awkwardness of religious distinctiveness.

In the same way, Christianity re-centred can *look* like truth-in-hand, because it holds to the distinctiveness of the tradition, but actually, it subtly holds the two kinds of truth in tension: affirming what is distinctive, but not seeing it as static or closed; rather, there is scope for renewal and receiving new insights, so the story continues

In other words, Christianity re-centred allows us to conceive of Christian tradition as a distinct dance, which has its own rhythms and steps, but which can nevertheless also learn new steps, through encounter with others, not ironing out the differences as though they're all dancing to the same tune, but still seeing the tradition as alive and unfolding – which is very much in tune with the spirit of resurrection, rooted in tradition but representing the great rupture and surprise

The comparative study of Kristin Johnston Largen, *Baby Krishna, Infant Christ*, reflects this dynamism. She suggests that Christian tradition is broadly more focused on God's love as *agape*, simply self-giving, whereas Hindu traditions are more at ease with God's love also being *eros*, mutually giving *and receiving*.⁸ She proposes that Christianity can be re-centred through rediscovering this *eros*-dimension – which is there *within* our tradition, but given less attention

What *eros* especially makes possible, even while it's also about self-assertion, is a clearer sense of the tradition's *receptivity* to what others bring – that this can be a feature both of *God* themselves, and of those who live in the light of such a God; it gives us a basis for receiving, rather than supposing we must always perpetuate what Kosuke Koyama called 'the teacher complex',⁹

⁷ Jenny Daggers (2013) *Postcolonial Theology of Religions: Particularity and Pluralism in World Christianity*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp.116-17, 129

⁸ Kristin Johnston Largen (2011), *Baby Krishna, Infant Christ: A Comparative Theology of Salvation*, Maryknoll: Orbis, pp.64ff

⁹ Kosuke Koyama (1979) *Three Miles an Hour God*, London: SCM, p.51ff

as though Christianity can only teach and not learn. (Sahi's art also reflects this interaction with Hindu tradition – in this case, here in the *Lord of creation*¹⁰)

Incidentally, it's relevant that Largen's insight into eros arises particularly from a focus on the *childness* of God, since God as Krishna *enjoys* being with people, delighting in us, playing with us in the best sense, an *eros*-love relishing relationship, and in my own work, *God the Child*, I affirmed that the tradition benefits from this interaction between agape and eros¹¹ –

So the divine Child is boundless agape, loving us energetically, but at the same time, is also *eros*, asserting themselves in our midst & shamelessly gaining enjoyment from solidarity with us

This, however, is where I think we need some Christianity transcended *and* Christianity re-centred – because 'Christianity transcended' enables us to say that we don't find such interactions between agape and eros *only* in Christianity, so we can loosen our grip on any such assertions, but on the other hand, 'Christianity re-centred' helps us to see the distinctiveness of what that interaction means in Christianity *and* its capacity to evolve.

So too with resurrection: on the one hand, we recognise that other traditions also have themes and symbolisms connected with life coming out of death, God's capacity to overcome limits, but on the other, that resurrection plays a distinct role in a distinct story – and both of those assertions can be, on their own, truth-in-hand, assertions which are true but edited versions of truth – whereas resurrection also points to the less containable truth-in-process: that what we think are our final answers are not so final after all; that we are being invited to learn a new routine in the midst of the world which conditions us not to; that this is a rupture in the world as we know it which beckons us to straddle between worlds, falteringly, but hopefully – the world as it is and the world as it might become, which is closer at hand than we imagined.

It is, I think, best of all, *a playful child* who reveals this adventure and this dance to us and who says 'Do not hold on to me', as though coming from the future and beckoning us to follow

And it's this sense of Christian particularity which does at least 2 things in the context of interreligious encounter – it *prevents* Christians from thinking they can tidy up the story or close it down or find some neat way of explaining how everything fits; because instead, we have at the heart of our story something that is the basis of understandable 'fear and amazement', or unsettlement and surprise, which makes us loosen our grip on what we thought we knew, or held, or enacted, only to discover we're holding something that moves, and is more awkward, like being in an earthquake; so that what our story is about, is less manageable, less complete;

and secondly, it stops any interreligious conversation itself from presuming to know how it will end – it's messier, less contained, more unpredictable than we'd imagined.

¹⁰ See <http://www.sojourn-arts.com/blog/2020/10/7/jesus-as-dancer-jyoti-sahis-lord-of-creation>; see also <https://thejesusquestion.org/2012/02/21/jesus-the-dancer-part-2-the-art-of-jyoti-sahi/> - several of his pieces are shown here, including 'The Transfiguration (2000)' and 'Lord of dance (1980)', reflecting the dance-inspired interplay between Hindu and Christian traditions

¹¹ See Graham Adams (2019) *Theology of religions: through the lens of truth-as-openness*, Leiden: Brill, pp.69-70; Adams, *Holy Anarchy*, p.199; also, Adams (2024) *God the Child: small, weak and curious subversions*, London: SCM, pp.168, 181 – where I discuss relationships of mutuality: especially in the context of 'dis/ability' (p.130), I affirm divine and human *giving and receiving*.

After all, as Marianne Moyaert argues,¹² our own identity always has a fragility about it – a sense that we’re not even as ‘complete’ as we imagined, because strangeness is intrinsic to who we are; ‘we’ (while recognising that ‘we’ can mean different things) were once strangers, and more than that, *God comes to us in the stranger*, so being conscious of our own incomplete knowingness and of our invitation to be receptive to what seems strange, together these tell us that we’re still becoming – we’re still re-centring our story through encounter with others.

And in this process of becoming, which involves responsible self-criticism, **postcolonial thinkers remind us that power and responsibility aren’t evenly spread**: in fact, as Kwok Pui-lan argues, those of colonised heritage have a role as watchdog, checking out whether those of coloniser heritage are projecting their own ‘totalising narratives’ on to others¹³ – so basically warning us to keep re-centring what we presumed to be the story, to hear other voices, from other angles, as resurrection continues to unsettle the powers of control *within* Christianity as well as in the systems and ideologies at large.

And the question of gender can help to alert us to these inequalities – because in John chapter 20, the risen Jesus speaks first to a woman, Mary, and tells her not to hold on to him – but perhaps, if she was going to hold on, it was out of a legitimate desire for connection, human relationship and solidarity, whilst the man presumes the role of glorious isolation – so who holds the power, and who is addressed, and what their intentions are – these things matter.

Interestingly, Kelly Latimore’s icon¹⁴ of the encounter depicts Jesus squatting, as though a gardener at one with the soil, while Mary stands tall – not the usual way the scene is presented, but perhaps suggesting a humbler Jesus and allowing for a more courageous, bolder woman, bringing her faith and her questions – and in this context, perhaps the exhortation ‘do not hold on to me’ gives permission to Mary not to lose balance by holding on to a squatting man; permission for her to stand firm in her identity – perhaps the risen Jesus is affirming this.

See how the context, the dynamic, who addresses who and with what intentions – these affect how resurrection is seen and used, but also they speak to interreligious encounters.

The womanist theologian Monica Coleman is pertinent here – in her brilliant book, *Making a way out of no way*,¹⁵ she sees God as always offering possibilities, but ones with which human beings are free to exercise their own agency in response; so Black people, especially women, become answers to their own struggles, as God makes absent possibilities become present, which is relevant to all who are facing closed-down situations or any kind of oppression; and she suggests that God’s offer of possibilities does not only occur in Jesus, but in other ways too, because God is always the God of possibility-making..

So resurrection, seen in this way, is about God opening up possibilities, in the specifically Christ-shaped context, but it also opens up to us the possibility of Christians being receptive to God’s possibility-making in other traditions, destabilising our presumption to have things closed –

¹² Marianne Moyaert (2011) *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality*, Amsterdam and New York, NY: Rodopi, pp.261-7

¹³ See Kwok Pui-lan (2005) *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, London: SCM, p.205, and Daggers’ elaboration of this, *Postcolonial Theology*, p.142

¹⁴ See <https://kellylatimoreicons.com/en-gb/pages/gallery> - Mary Magdalene and Christ the Gardener

¹⁵ Monica A. Coleman (2008) *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press

wherever issues of gender, or race, or class, or religion are constricting what seems possible; enabling us to build coalitions of possibility

There is a hint of this, too, in Angela Parker's *If God still breathes, why can't I?*, a womanist approach to scripture, where she identifies that how we receive Jesus' words depends on our heritage, since those of western and coloniser heritage have presumed to tell others what Jesus means and what having faith in him means¹⁶ – even though, for instance, in Paul's writings, following the new perspective on Paul, there is this constructive ambiguity in what is meant by having faith *in* Christ – it could equally mean the faith or faithfulness *of* Christ; and while faith 'in' Christ has encouraged western modes of religion to turn it into something mental and creedal,¹⁷ faith 'of' Christ makes it more about our participation in what Jesus is doing, which can even straddle the boundaries between religions.

So 'do not hold on to me' becomes a vital caution for any of us who think we know exactly what we're holding & want others to hold the same – the dance of resurrection faith, both within Christian tradition and at the interface between it and religious diversity, becomes something less stable but more life-giving, a basis for honest and messy and incomplete relationships.

After all, in a sense Jesus isn't only speaking to Mary, but to all of us – but perhaps especially those of us wedded to systems and habits and beliefs of implicit control; those of us who think that to hold on to Jesus is to require people to hold on to the church or a form of its theology.

Maybe, in fact, there needs to be space for some people to hold on to him more than others; those in greater precarity needing some stability, whereas those who can take their place of security for granted need to let go, until we learn to dance more freely, more justly, more generously.

In this way, resurrection becomes the basis for a different approach to interreligious engagement: recognising our need for some truth-in-hand, especially in contexts of fragility, while also opening us up to the demands and gift of truth-in-process, the expansiveness of our own tradition which we rediscover, and re-centre, through honest and receptive engagement with others; where we learn to *assert* eros-love which also means receiving from others, and find our own dance-steps developing.

Do not hold on to me – a form of resistance amidst systems of control, learning and teaching to hold differently, more lightly, while making room for others to join, in a dance of joy and lament, honest about the inequities of history and today; honest about how we are closed to each other while also making possible our appreciation of each other's possibility-making. Come & dance!

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¹⁶ Angela Parker (2021) *If God still breathes, why can't I? Black Lives Matter and Biblical Authority*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, pp.70, 77

¹⁷ Parker, *If God*, p.84

Resources

Adams, Graham (2022) *Holy Anarchy: dismantling domination, embodying community, loving strangeness*, London: SCM ... regarding resurrection as an under-the-radar dance lesson, and the two kinds of truth

Adams, Graham (2024) *God the Child: small, weak and curious subversions*, London: SCM ... regarding God as child

Coleman, Marianne (2005) *Making a way out of no way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press ... regarding the God who makes possibilities

Daggers, Jenny (2013) ... regarding Christianity transcended and Christianity re-centred (and see Adams' discussion of this in Adams (2019) *Theology of religions: through the lens of truth-as-openness*, Leiden: Brill)

Koyama, Kosuke *Three Mile an Hour God*, London: SCM ... regarding 'teacher complex'

Kwok, Pui-lan ... regarding those of colonised heritage testing the 'totalising narratives' of those of coloniser heritage

Largen, Kristin Johnston (2011) *Baby Krishna, Infant Christ* ... regarding eros and agape

Moyaert, Marianne (2011) *Fragile Identities* ... regarding identities as fragile and incomplete

Parker, Angela, (2023) *If God can still breathe, why can't I?* ... regarding the question of who is addressed and how it is heard by people of different heritages

Sahi, Jyoti, *Stepping stones* ... regarding Jesus and mission as dance