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IMPELLED TO PLURALISM: THOUGHTS ABOUT TEACHING IN A LUTHERAN UNIVERSITY

James L. Huffman

Precisely accurate or not, our childhood images help us craft those personal narratives that, in turn, shape our understandings of life, God, and the world. In one such image, I see myself kneeling beside the living room sofa, Mother on one side and my sister on the other, listening to Dad's prayers and thinking, "I'm so fortunate: born in America, and reared in the one true religion!" Half a century has colored the image: encounters with friends who believe and friends who deny, with personal tragedies and triumphs, with other religious traditions as fervent as my own. Today, when the scene floats into my consciousness, it comes as a point of departure. I remain thankful for the stability and the love I experienced in those morning devotions, but the sense of blessed superiority has vanished. Decades of living have taken away my conviction that Christianity is the best religion. More than that, they have convinced me that religious triumphalism is not only wrong but pernicious, perhaps even un-Christian. In the pages that follow, I will attempt to explain both the ideas that have led me to this conviction and the implications of religious pluralism for my teaching. First, however, a reflection on the personal journey that has led to this place.

The Journey

Life's first two decades found me following what I would call *the comfortable Christ*. I did not see his path as comfortable then, being part of a community that required us to take a stand against prevailing culture: no dancing, no movies, no card playing, no profanity. But the setting provided a secure body of beliefs that made decisions easy. My home exuded the best values of the rural Midwest: hard work; deep love, openly shared; active participation in community life. My school inculcated American values right along with biology and history. And the church offered a clear theology centered in God's sovereignty, the Bible's infallibility, and a direct relationship with the Creator. Thus, I entered adulthood with a full set of beliefs. God existed. *He* was sovereign over all. He had revealed Himself to humanity through his only son, Jesus Christ, who was born in Bethlehem, spent the better part of three years preaching and healing, died at the hand of the establishment, rose again the third day, and ascended to heaven as the exclusive lord of all on earth. Those who believed in Christ were saved eternally; those who did not were damned. Like my peers, I questioned some of this at times. Did God really exist? Why, if salvation had to come through Jesus, had so many not encountered him? But the questions were peripheral and occasional; the certainties formed my core.

My undergraduate years did little to challenge this, but by the time I was in graduate school, I had begun to struggle with ideas about a *more complex Christ*. The new setting had much to do with the change. Working on a degree in journalism at Northwestern University, I had professors who sneered (often unfairly, I thought then, as I do now) at absolutes and at my brand of conservatism. Then, as a reporter in Minneapolis, I developed friends who were simultaneously more skeptical about religion and more passionate about social justice than I ever had been; I also began, on the paper's religion beat, to have conversations with Christians of many kinds, from death of God advocates to evangelical apologists, and I found most of them compelling on some points. When I went back to school for a degree in East Asian studies, expecting to become a foreign correspondent, the questions multiplied. And when I went to Japan, with my wife Judith, for two years of study, I began to encounter sincere, even passionate, religious people whose truth search had not brought them even close to faith in Christ. What did it all mean?

Even today I can remember the fear I felt when I wrote in my journal, somewhere on a Tokyo train, that I no longer could assign to the realm of the damned anyone who did not believe in Christ. I still believed in Jesus as the only savior. But my belief had become more nuanced. I came to the conclusion in these years that even if salvation were through Jesus alone, those who pursued truth sincerely would achieve salvation – whether they were conscious or not that they were following Jesus. Christ may have said, "No one comes to the Father but by me"; but he also said, "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold." Years later the evangelical theologian Clark H. Pinnock would argue that "the faith principle is the basis of universal accessibility," even while defending the claim that salvation only is available, ultimately, through Christ. Theologians as orthodox as John Wesley and Ulrich Zwingli, he pointed out, had insisted that God would not condemn those who had not heard of Christ.¹ It was a formula that I found appealing.

But not appealing enough. By the late 1970s when I had settled in as a professor at a Lutheran university, having been lured away from journalism by the delights of Japanese history, I no longer found Pinnock's formula adequate. I found myself moving into a third stage, where I came to see *Christ as the humble teacher*. The better I knew those Japanese friends, the less I was able to conceive that a just God would force them to come through *my* faith alone to

achieve salvation. The more I studied scripture and theology, the more I became convinced that the love described in the gospel precludes superiority complexes (even Christian ones). The more I examined history, the more certain I was that religious triumphalism is evil. Even Pinnock's idea of salvation for all through Christ smacks of arrogance. And arrogance, I decided, merits no place in the theology of the servant Christ. Thus, I became a pluralist—still Christian but no longer willing to claim superiority for my faith over that of my Buddhist or Islamic sisters and brothers. Diane Eck of Harvard has written that “Christians have not only a witness to bear, but also a witness to hear.”² As long as I considered my own tradition superior, I found it difficult to hear what those in other faiths had to say.

The Argument

The only thing unique about my ideas lies in that which is unique for all of us, the path I have taken to get to this position, and the particular combination of reasons that make it compelling to me. Before discussing those reasons, however, I must explain what I mean by pluralism. I use the word not in a formal philosophical sense but more informally, taking it to denote simply a nonjudgmental appreciation of other religions, particularly in matters of faith and revelation.³ Pluralism of this sort does not necessarily regard all religions as equal or identical; nor does it suggest that believers should be less than fully committed to their own traditions. Indeed, it insists that without such commitment, dialogue is meaningless. The core of the pluralism that I envision lies in a radical rejection of triumphalism, a refusal to regard my own faith tradition as superior to others.

1. In explaining my path to pluralism, I will start with the arguments that spring primarily from the realm of human reason. As I noted above, even during the first two stages of my journey, I struggled with several intellectual questions: why a compassionate God would damn people whose truth search had been sincere; how a creative document such as the Bible could be squeezed into neat doctrinal systems. One of the most important of the rational issues, for me, was the contradiction between the universal claims Christian theology makes about God and the particularistic way most Christian writers apply those claims. God's universality lies at the heart of Christian orthodoxy. God is: the creator of heaven and earth, the One by whom and for whom all things are made, the parent of us all. If I take the wings of the morning, God is there; if I descend into the deep at night, God is there. What sense then does it make to limit God's revelation to the Christian scriptures? What of the Chinese sages' writings? The Indians'? The Nigerians'? Why would a

compassionate, all-powerful being hide revelation from three-fourths of earth's people? When I asked that question as a youth, I was told that I was naive. No one ever has answered it for me though. The Sri Lankan Methodist Wesley Ariarajah has written, “All beings live and move and have their being in that God. There is no Christian God, Hindu God or Muslim God; there can only be Christian, Hindu and Muslim understandings of God. . . . The biblical teaching is that there are no two gods, only God.”⁴ If that one being is the God of the Buddhists and Confucianists, their scriptures and teachings surely must emanate from that being too.

Another compelling issue lies in the fact that pride is blinding and corrupting. Once, I thought the proverb's warning that “pride comes before disaster”⁵ was meant personally; arrogance made me careless, liable to grand mistakes. Over time, I have come to see that the writer referred also to systems, to nations, and to faith traditions. When I see Truth as residing in my system alone, I am likely to ignore others' insights—and thus to impoverish myself. As a scholar of Asia, I have seen so often the tendency of self-impressed Europeans and Americans to slight, ignore, and mistreat Asian nations. That same sense of superiority, unconscious though it may be, too often renders Asian religions irrelevant, uninteresting, or just plain backward, in the eyes of Christian triumphalists. When the Bostonian Edward House went to Japan as a reporter for the *New York Tribune* in 1870, he admired Christianity. When he wrote his editor two years later, however, he had decided that missionaries, both Protestant and Catholic, were “extremely mischievous.” The reason? The missionaries' insistence that Christianity alone had anything salutary to offer had become an impediment to “the free progress of ideas and actions,” a block to “freedom of opinion.”⁶ The German novelist Gunter Grass expressed a similar thought in his 1999 Nobel prize acceptance speech, when he lamented the frequency with which church and state authorities attempt to silence writers who allude “to the idea that truth exists only in the plural.”⁷ Convinced that only *their* truth is truly true (or afraid, perhaps, that it really is not true), the triumphalists are uninterested in looking seriously at the riches other traditions have to offer.

Perhaps the most serious of the rational issues, for me, lies in the fact that the step from claiming superior truth to excluding, even oppressing, the people who hold “inferior” beliefs often is a short one. Fewer features of human history are more disheartening than the endless lists of people who have violated others in the name of religious differences: Confucian Chinese who obliterated Buddhists in the ninth century, Tendai Buddhist priests who burned down Shingon temples in fourteenth century Japan; Spanish warriors who

sailed to the Indian Ocean in the fifteenth century with "a spiritual urge to conquer heathen lands for Christ" and a "fanatical zeal to cut at the root of Islam by attacking it from behind,"⁸ Catholic priests who destroyed Filipino village life in the 1700s by forcing people off the farm and "under the bell," Americans who wanted to force change on "polished, intelligent, suave, apt, enterprising, eye-taking" Japanese in the 1800s, simply because these people were "heathen from top to bottom."⁹ And the list continues today: Catholics and Protestants at war in Northern Ireland, Jews and Moslems in the Middle East, Christians and Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Christians and Moslems in southeastern Europe, pro-lifers and pro-choicers in the United States, Hindus, Sikhs and Moslems in India and Pakistan. It would be inaccurate to blame these conflicts on faith issues alone, or to say that religious triumphalism necessarily leads to bigotry; the issues and power relationships are complex. But it would be equally mistaken to ignore the fact that the encouragement of a sense of religious superiority far too often has legitimized, and even empowered, those who are prone to abuse others in the name of faith.

On learning of the death of David Livingstone in 1874, the editor of the *New York Herald* (hardly an extremist paper) wrote that Africa, "assailed by the influences of civilization, . . . must surrender and become a useful, wholesome and prosperous home for many millions now crowded into Europe and America." Did he worry about the fate of the Africans themselves? Not at all. Did he raise moral questions about the coming invasion? No. The fact that the Africans were neither Christian nor "civilized" made this "one of the noblest works of our time."¹⁰ It is tempting to argue that this was another era, but it was little more than a decade ago that a board member of a Lutheran college told me that we should not support divestment in South Africa because Christian companies supporting apartheid were preferable to non-Christian firms of any kind. No matter how vigorously those of us in the center shake off our responsibility for religion-induced intolerance, no matter how easily we blame bigotry on the extremists or the "right wing," the fact is that as long as we accept the tendency to call other faith traditions "wrong," or "heathen," we run the risk of becoming, at the least, complicit in perpetuating religiously based discrimination.

2. None of these "rational" arguments would be wholly convincing to me, as a Christian, if biblical revelation did not say something quite similar. There was a time when the oft-quoted exclusive texts worried me quite deeply: Jesus's claim in John 14:6, for example, that "no one comes to the Father except by me," or Paul's assertion in I Timothy 2:5 that "there is one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus." Such statements remain problematic, I admit. But

beyond the fact that proof texts such as these must be interpreted in the light of broader biblical themes, they need to be understood in the context of their times, as statements made to new Jewish believers from a tradition that had a specific, agreed upon understanding of God's nature. Ariarajah argues that, taken in the light of Christ's other work and teachings, these texts should be seen as "faith statements" that "derive their meaning in the context of faith, and have no meaning outside the community of faith." They were meant to express the special, loving relationship between Christ and his followers, not "to discredit other belief." We are mistaken "when we take these confessions in the language of faith and love and turn them into absolute truths."¹¹

More important to me is the fact that the use of faith confessions to denigrate other religions runs counter to the overall tenor of Christ's approach to truth, to what Steven Schroeder calls "a theology of the cross grounded on the confession that God entered into human form and died." Our Lord's command in the Sermon on the Mount that we avoid judging others is phrased in unambiguous terms, as are several statements about leaving evaluations of others to God, because of the impossibility of discerning the heart.¹² The central characteristic of Jesus's ministry was humility and service, a fact that suggests both the necessity of adopting a learner's stance and the inappropriateness of making ourselves judges of others' traditions. Christ did judge, but only those within his own community who claimed some special hold on truth or twisted Jewish beliefs into self-serving doctrines that perverted their own tradition: the false prophets, the Pharisees, the haughtily pious and learned. Toward others, he was the gentle teacher, the one who "made himself nothing, assuming the nature of a slave" (Philippians 2:6), the one who washed the disciples' feet, who made innocent children the model for those seeking to enter God's kingdom. One looks in vain in the gospels for condemnation or rejection of other religious traditions; what one finds is a life centered in service and a message focused on hope for hungry, seeking people.

One also finds in Jesus an openness to the unconventional, to those whom the establishment rejected as wrong or unworthy. The theologian John Cobb, arguing that "Christocentrism provides the deepest and fullest reason for openness to others," says that Jesus calls us to take other traditions seriously because his "character is above all love, not only of those like ourselves, but of those we are prone to count as opponents."¹³ Reading Mark and Luke in particular, one cannot miss the constancy with which Jesus reached out to the groups whom Israel's leaders rejected. He did not tell the Roman centurion or the woman from Syro-Phoenicia to get their theology right; he merely praised their faith and

touched their children. When the unorthodox cast out spirits in Jesus's name, it was his disciples he rebuked—for their judgmentalism. He irritated the religious leaders by socializing with prostitutes, tax collectors and all manner of sinners—and acting as if he enjoyed it. He welcomed women as regular members of his entourage. The point is that theological correctness and conventional norms were not a concern of Jesus or his biographers, except to point out that “correctness” was an impediment to salvation. The only commandment that mattered, he reminded the would-be follower, was love: of God, of neighbors, and of self. To use the teachings of that kind of man as an excuse for triumphalism is to miss his spirit.

3. A final reason for eschewing exclusivism lies in the danger that it poses to our own spiritual and intellectual growth. I already have noted the way exclusivism blinds us to what other traditions have to offer; here, I want to discuss specific insights from Asian religions that I would have missed had I persisted in my early tendency simply to reject other traditions. One of my inspirations is Tanaka Shozo, an early environmental activist who drew openly on Confucius's vision of a magnanimous political order and on Buddhism's teachings about how to maintain personal tranquility, even as he found in Christ the model for “living the truth.”¹⁴ Another is the Quaker thinker Nitobe Inazo, a vice president of the League of Nations. For want of space, however, I will focus on the works of Endo Shusaku, twentieth century Japan's most important Christian novelist.

Baptized a Catholic, Endo was indefatigable in his effort to relate Christian experience to Asian faith traditions, and the result was a remarkable outpouring of insights. He is best known for his novel *Silence*, in which Buddhist ideas about quietude and perseverance inform his descriptions of seventeenth century village Christians who ask why God remained silent while they were being tortured, only to be told, “I was not silent. I suffered beside you.”¹⁵ *The Samurai*, set in the same era, posits the arrogance of an ambitious priest against the humanity of several poor samurai-farmers, and brings them to faith only after they have identified with images of Christ's emaciated body on the cross. It is the hurting, empathizing Christ, not the glorious icon of European cathedrals, in whom they discover hope. Asians, Endo often said, are drawn most compellingly to a God who, like a “warm-hearted mother rather than a stern father,” nurtures them, weeps with them and gives them “changeless, enduring companionship.” He pursues this theme most explicitly in his *Life of Jesus*, where he discovers the greatest meaning not in the resurrection but in God's decision at Calvary to cast off power in order to understand human beings. Of the Master, he says: “He was thin; he wasn't much. One thing about him, however—he was never

known to desert other people if they had trouble. When women were in tears, he stayed by their side. When old folks were lonely, he sat with them quietly. . . . The sunken eyes overflowed with love more profound than a miracle.”¹⁶

Endo's ideas are controversial: some of them orthodox, others disturbing. Always, however, he challenges us to see the gospel in new ways. And always he draws on two springs: his own Christian faith, and the Asian religious traditions that surround him. After the protagonist in his last novel, *Deep River*, has indicted Christianity for not regarding “other religions as equal to itself,” for regarding “noble people of other faiths” merely as “Christians driving without a license,” he comments: “I think the real dialogue takes place when you believe that God has many faces, and that he exists in all religions.” He is not saying that all religions are the same, or that he would find himself satisfied in any faith tradition. Indeed, his protagonist concludes, “I can't leave the Church, . . . Jesus has me in his grasp.” But Endo insists that a Christ who “accepted and loved the Samaritan” seeks followers who will study and learn earnestly, openly and without condescension, from other paths toward God.¹⁷

Asian religious truths that have shaped my own religious understandings also include the Shinto appreciation for the sacredness of nature and for the divine spark in all beings, Confucian emphases on the ethical responsibilities of leaders and the necessity of recognizing the goodness in everyone, and the Buddhist belief in the consequences of our actions and in the inability of material things to satisfy. These emphases all resonate with Christian themes, just as Christian ideas have counterparts in Asian religions, but Shinto, Confucianism and Buddhism look at these ideas in their own ways; and they put more emphasis on them. When the French priest Jean Sullivan observes that Jesus' ideas were “disconcerting, unclassifiable,” that his “logic was interior,” never “organized according to a rigorous logic,” and that “only commentators and exegetes . . . have transformed his sayings into a system,”¹⁸ I find my spirit resonating, partly because of the power of his argument, but mostly because my encounter with East Asian faiths has readied me to hear him.

There are other arguments for pluralism. Ariarajah contends that the *dialogue* mandated by the gospel is not possible without mutual respect for each other's views, and that mutuality cannot occur among people who consider the other ineligible for salvation. Cobb maintains that Christ's focus on the future, on the coming kingdom of God, requires an openness to change that is possible only when we “listen to the truth and wisdom of others.”¹⁹ Even Luther, I would suggest, gives us clues about the need to move

beyond exclusivism. On the negative side, his shameful anti-Semitism sprang, at least in part, from a proclivity for judging non-Christian people and doctrines intolerantly. On the positive side, his ability to break with orthodoxy stands testament, as does his insistence on the universal priesthood of believers, to a conviction that eternal truth is not chained to a theology approved by the establishment or by tradition. It follows that one must always be a seeker, open to truths and revelations in other traditions as much as in one's own. Space precludes more detailed consideration of these other arguments for pluralism, however. We need to turn now to the effect that the rejection of triumphalism is likely to have on one's teaching.

The Impact

Evaluating teaching is difficult. To ferret out precisely the connections between values and practice is impossible. At the same time, ongoing self-evaluation lies at the core of good teaching. It is for that reason that I will venture, cautiously, into a discussion of the impact my commitment to pluralism has had on my role as a classroom teacher in a Lutheran university. While the areas that might be considered are endless, I will focus on two topics that wend their way with unusual frequency through the history of East Asia: religion and nationalism.

The first thing to be said about the way I present the East Asian religious traditions is that I insist, in classroom discussions, that we use respectful language. Words such as superstitious and weird are not acceptable, especially in discussions of more dramatic topics such as Daoism and shamanism. I make it clear to students that I am not interested in controlling their thoughts, but that fruitful understanding of a practice is impossible when we assign that practice to the "superstition" or "odd" bin. My second rule is to work hard at understanding the East Asian religious systems as fully and sympathetically as possible myself. Religious systems are by nature complex and nebulous. If Christianity seems that way to me, how much more the traditions that are foreign. For that reason, when a doctrine or practice seems counter-intuitive, or irrational, I believe I have a special responsibility to work it through until it no longer baffles me.

The Buddhist doctrine of non-attachment illustrates this process. Central to Buddhist thought, it holds that the source of life's pain is attachment to objects of any sort; the goal of life is to reach a point where one is no longer attached to anything. For years, I taught about this doctrine quite unconvincingly, silently thinking, "This really is nonsense; things *are* real; things bring joy; is it impossible to become wholly unattached." As I have struggled with the doctrine,

however, my understanding of it has grown, and I have come to regard it with deep respect, almost awe. The concept has little, if anything, to do with denying the pleasure that comes from having material or sensual things. It means rather recognizing the ephemeral nature of all worldly phenomena and developing the capacity to give them up effortlessly, instantaneously—*without attachment*. I still have my doubts about whether human beings are capable of such an attitude and I know that my understanding remains incomplete. But as I have come closer to understanding, I have seen student reactions change. Those once likely to dismiss Buddhism with "That's strange!" seem to take it more seriously. As my explanations have come closer to a reality with which students can connect, the discussions have grown livelier. My third rule in teaching East Asian religions is to connect East Asian practices and doctrines, when possible, to similarities in Christianity, and thus to make them seem less exceptional. I never suggest that East Asian religions are not fundamentally different from Christianity; they are, and students remain aware of that fact. But it is striking how much more understandable a tradition can be when similarities are highlighted. When, for example, students read about priests in the pacifist Buddhist tradition fighting viciously with each other, or when they see "non-attached" bonzes flaunting their material wealth, they often react quite skeptically about Buddhist doctrine, until similar doctrine/practice discrepancies in the Christian church are pointed out. The Chinese practice of ancestor veneration calls for a discussion of my own family's practice of placing flowers on the graves of departed loved ones. Even the non-attachment becomes clearer to some students when I discuss Christ's admonitions about the lilies that neither "toil nor spin."

A new point for comparison came to me while I was visiting a series of Buddhist temples in western Japan not long ago. As I was standing in front of one altar, it struck me suddenly that the worshipers' attitudes had little to do with Buddhist theology. People came in great numbers; they prayed; they worshiped; they burned incense. But no one seemed interested in non-attachment; most likely they had never even thought about it. They wanted a good life: healing for sick relatives, better jobs, safety on the highway. That was all. And in that, they reminded me of those who attend my own church every Sunday morning. When I pointed this similarity out to my students, they surprised me by the quickness of their own response; a recognition of the universal contrast between what people want and what theologians say appeared to make it easier for them to take Buddhism itself more seriously.

None of this is meant to suggest that I take a non-critical approach to religion, East Asian or Christian. It is crucial, I think, to apply two criteria to *all* religions. First, do they produce humane behavior; do they call for honesty, justice, compassion? Second, does the tradition exhibit integrity; are its practices consistent with its own standards? I am unembarrassed about applying those questions when I talk about East Asian religions. The hierarchical Confucian structure has led to a kind of male dominance in Chinese history that seems to me both exceptional and abusive. I say just that. We talk too about the power grabbing politics of Buddhist temples in Japan across the centuries, about the willingness of Zen leaders to adapt to the political currents of each era. And we discuss the Christian missionaries' unholy alliance between God and mammon that led to the expulsion of Christianity from Japan in the 1600s. My goal, in short, is for my students to understand the religions of East Asia as fully, as sympathetically, and as honestly as possible--and thus to learn not just what the religious teachers say but how their followers live, and how their traditions can enrich our own understandings of God and life.

One might not expect the teaching of a topic such as nationalism to be affected as much by a commitment to religious pluralism. I would argue, however, that it is--that if the rejection of triumphalism inspires me to look at East Asian religions more sympathetically, it also pushes me to examine the impact of nationalism with more fear and more humility than I otherwise might. The first thing to be said here is that few topics have had more influence on East Asian development in the last two centuries. In peninsular Korea, nationalism has fired independence movements, helped to split the country, and caused endless debate over how to restore unity. In China, it has led to wars, to failed revolutions, to the Communist victory, and to recent efforts to reassert leadership over Asia. And in Japan, nationalism has inspired great social and technological transformations as well as a devastating march to war. It is hardly a stretch to label it the modern era's most dynamic force. The question for us, however, has to do with the way it is taught. How does a commitment to religious pluralism influence the way I handle this secular force in the classroom?

Although the answer is, once again, complex, I will concentrate on two approaches that grow from my belief in openness. First, I find it essential to address *the pernicious effects of nationalism* in the political sphere. If the use of good/bad categories undergirds religious intolerance, it does the same in the world of international relations, just as respect for the Other makes both realms healthier. For that reason, it is important to look rigorously at the negative influence of narrow nationalism when we study East Asian history.

A striking example arises in nineteenth century China, where an unshakable conviction that China was the central kingdom blinded leaders to the threats and opportunities of the western invasion. The brilliance of Chinese civilization in the 1700s is undeniable. No European country had a richer culture, a more educated or sophisticated ruling class, a more extensive network of roads and canals integrating a vast geographical region. When the Chinese emperors sneered at the coarseness of British merchants, they did so with reason. By the end of the 1800s, however, China's system lay in ruins. She had lost several wars; regionalism was pulling the country apart; rebel movements were stirring. An important reason for this collapse was a belief in national superiority that caused officials to underestimate the imperialists. When the British envoy George Macartney requested trading privileges in 1793, the Qianlong emperor rejected them in a response that called China "the hub and centre about which all quarters of the globe revolve" and belittled "the lonely remoteness" of England.²⁰ The resultant history was, for China, tragic.

It also is important for students to think seriously about what nationalism can do *to* others, and for that lesson few stories are more fruitful than Japan's twentieth century, when patriotism helped lead Japan into World War II. Even the most internationalist of Japan's leaders believed in Japanese uniqueness in the 1920s and 1930s; from that belief, it was a short step to the idea that Japan had a special mission to civilize Asia, and thence to support for military aggression as a means of spreading civilization. That was not the whole story, as I will discuss below, but it is an important part of the story. Three quarters of a century ago, before anyone had envisioned much of what would happen in the 1930s, the historian Hans Kohn worried that European nationalism was being "speedily transformed into a destructive principle."²¹ Unfortunately, that transformation proved ominous for East Asia too, as ominous as exclusivism so often is in the religious sphere. It is crucial that this issue be raised in the classroom, since it runs counter to most students' intuitions about patriotism.

Second, the commitment to pluralism compels me to try to *interpret each country's nationalist experiences from that nation's own perspective*. A task of this sort is rendered difficult by the fact that I am an American, reared in an American setting and immersed in American stories and values. But openness demands that I make the effort, and that I help my students make the effort too. The two topics just discussed--China's nineteenth century collapse and Japan's rush toward World War II--should illustrate what I mean.

In the case of China, sensitivity to the Chinese self-understanding requires that I spend at least as much time on Chinese strengths and rationality as I do on the myopia. I have decided, for example, that it is a mistake to begin courses on modern China with the nineteenth century, the period when the decline set in. That makes it too easy for students to conclude that China is "backward," when the truth is that the modern era is the aberration. Unless I spend considerable time on the pre-1800 years, students fail to understand China's historic brilliance. At least as important is the necessity of helping students see that Chinese decisions in the 1800s were quite rational given the context of their times, not much different from the choices American officials probably would have made in similar circumstances. Debate over how to respond to imperialist gunboats was as intense and intelligent as it would be in any society. Some officials advocated a return to traditional morality, some the development of China's own factories and modern armies, some a radical restructuring of the Chinese system. That the chauvinist groups eventually triumphed was a great misfortune, but even they acted in rational ways, and their nationalism was neither greater nor narrower than that of most western leaders. This picture is less satisfying to students than a simplistic picture of China as exotic and wrong-headed, but it is more accurate. And it confronts the triumphalism of so many accounts.

Japan's World War II tale also is more complex than American historians typically have made it. Without excusing the aggressive nationalism, I find it important to lead the class through the steps that led toward the war, steps that shift culpability toward the Europeans and Americans without removing it from Japan. There was western imperialism, which convinced Japanese leaders, early in the modern period, that only an army would gain them respect and security; there was flagrant discrimination against Asian immigrants to Europe and America in the early twentieth century, which triggered calls for the display

of national strength abroad; there was the hypocrisy of Americans criticizing Japan's "Asian Monroe Doctrine," even as U.S. officials strengthened their own authority in Latin America. As one Japanese internationalist wrote during the 1920s: "Most Americans, even so-called liberals, seem so cocksure of the wisdom, the justice, and the humanitarian ideals of their country and government that their inconsistency, so obvious to us, never bothers them."²² By the 1930s and early 1940s, Western culpability also included quite a number of specific policies that encouraged Japan's extremists even as they limited the options of moderate officials. Many students resist this narrative; it is neither as clear-cut nor as America-friendly as they want. But it fills out the picture more honestly, even as it militates against the good/bad syndrome that underlies exclusivist thinking. It also makes it clear that nationalism is a universal phenomenon, and that its European and American forms helped spawn the aggression in Japan that in turn threatened the imperialist powers themselves after 1941.

The soul of this argument is that it is as important to embrace pluralism when I explain the political sphere as it is when I interpret religion. Convinced that triumphalism is pernicious *anywhere*, the teacher must help students both to develop a healthy sense of humility about their own traditions and to nourish understanding and respect for others. The gospel, writes Sullivan, is a "call to inner upheaval, to *awakening*," a fact that he learned after he had seen Christ's teachings filtered through the "wisdom of the Orient."²³ Students should be taught to embrace that inner upheaval as an ongoing process; for new and unsettling ideas make us grow, even as they upset us. They point out new paths, even as they brighten the old ones. It is for this reason that I feel compelled to help my students hear the voices of Asia, both religious and secular, as sympathetically as they do their own.

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Notes

¹Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions*. Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992, pp. 157-158.

²Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993, p. 19.

³I have left largely unaddressed the issue, important to philosophers and theologians like Gavin D'Costa, of the divergent truth claims made by religions. My basic position is that all truth has a historical component; thus, claims about matters of revelation cannot and should not be evaluated as more or less "true," because such judgments involve the application of rational criteria to that which lies beyond the rational. To delve seriously into this issue is beyond the focus and space limits of this essay.

⁴Wesley Ariarajah, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, pp. 9-10.

⁵Proverbs 16:18 (NEV).

⁶Letter from Edward H. House to Whitelaw Reid, July 20, 1872, in Whitelaw Reid Papers, Library of Congress.

⁷Gunter Grass, "To Be Continued . . ." *PMLA Journal*. Vol. CXV, No. 3 (May 2000), p. 296.

⁸K. M. Panaikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959, p. 27.

⁹Congregationalist missionary J. L. Atkinson, quoted in Akira Iriye, *Across the Pacific: An Inner History of American-East Asian Relations*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967, p. 19.

¹⁰Editorial, *New York Herald*, April 20, 1874.

¹¹Ariarajah, pp. 23, 26.

¹²Matthew 7:1; also see Mark 9:39-41, Matthew 23:27, and John 7:25.

¹³John B. Cobb, Jr., "Beyond 'Pluralism,'" in Gavin D'Costa, ed, *Beyond Pluralism, The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*. New York: Orbis Books, 1990, p. 91.

¹⁴Tanaka's approach to Christian faith is discussed in Masao Takenaka, *God is Rice: Asian culture and Christian faith*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986, pp. 49-70.

¹⁵Shusaku Endo, *Silence*. New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1980, p. 190.

¹⁶Endo, *A Life of Jesus*. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1979: "warm-hearted mother," p. 1; "companionship," p. 80; "He was thin," p. 173.

¹⁷Endo, *Deep River*. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1994: God's many faces, p. 122; "in his grasp", p. 191.

¹⁸Jean Sullivan, *Morning Light The Spiritual Journey of Jean Sullivan*. New York: Paulist Press, 1988, p. 48.

¹⁹Cobb, p. 91.

²⁰Qianlong, "The Second Edict, September 1793," in Pei-kai Cheng and Michael Lestz, with Jonathan D. Spence, eds. *The Search for Modern China: A Documentary Collection*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999, pp. 106-109.

²¹Hans Kohn. *A History of Nationalism in the East*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929, p. 431.

²²Karl Kawakami, *Tokyo Nichi Nichi Shimbun*, May 6, 1926; I am indebted for this material to William H. Hoover of the University of Toledo.

²³Sullivan, p. 11.