

Tim's questions (and Ed's responses) about Christianity in Bali

Colleagues,

Once before a thoughtful response from nephew Tim Hoyer, ELCA pastor, to these Thursday postings generated another edition of ThTh. Well, its happened again. Read on.

Cheers!

Ed

Tim,

Two postings I have from you, each with enuf questions to exhaust the small handful of answers I have lying around the Bali parsonage these days.

1. You ask: "What is the style of preaching you have heard there?" The answer is that, like you, I'm booked every Sunday, and thus I only hear my own. I do yet want to get to Indonesian language liturgies, but I won't really know what's going on. My (almost) total experience of church life here is with my English-language crowd where a very un-Balinese American-style fundamentalism shapes the spirituality. How that got to be their ethos is something I'm trying to find out. I got some help at a recent clergy seminar on "Living Together in [Indonesias] Pluralist Society." One speaker pointed to "colonial theology," as the source, namely the Northern European pietism that came with the missionaries, and is still regnant in Indonesia. That makes sense to me. Whether its the whole ball of wax,

though, I wonder.

2. You ask whether your wife's experience when she was in Nepal is corroborated here, namely, that the Gospel of "a grace-filled Christ connexion to a God of mercy, [is] something so good that it is hard to believe as true." From what we were learning, it's true here too. Hinduism is not a user-friendly religion/way of life. Besides the zillion (seems to us) required sacrifices day in and day out, the ugly terror in the masks of the deities who populate the Balinese dance dramas we view are hardly winsome. And if the mask isn't enough, what these deities do to the human participants on stage is dread-full. The gods are never satisfied. They don't play fair. You really cannot win. "Balance" between the bad ones and the good ones is the most to be hoped for. Evil never gets conquered, so you go for balance—manipulated as best you can in your favor with appropriate ritual actions. Harmony (between the good and evil powers) is another English word we frequently hear from Hindus, but it's not harmony as in music. Sounds to us like this harmony is "balanced" music. Namely, generating enough good noise to restrain, cover over, the bad noise so that you are not destroyed by its deadly decibels.

One of the church's "drivers" while taking us to a meeting, told us that hearing about a Jesus who loves "bad people" was what prompted him to switch. To my impious add-on, "bad people like you?" he just laughed. As I've mentioned in other missives, Christ's plain power to counter the destroying demons is a constant comment in Christians' confessions.

3. To my musings about the rituals on Wall Street, you gently protested: "It is not as if we have rituals to the gods before we trade and sell our stock." Well, I wonder. Are

you sure? What all was going on when that day-trader back in our homeland (ritually?) sacrificed the “oppressors” in his stock game plan? Im not in-the-know about the technical specs of ritual. Liturgical types would know more. But Wall Street surely abounds in salvation lingo, doesnt it? So can ritual be far behind? Savings and losses. Gaining or getting wiped out. Earnings. Making a killing. And what kind of animals “really” are that bull and that bear that mark the markets yin and yang, its upside and downside? Is the growing wave of Lone Ranger murders becoming a grass-roots ritual for our countrys “Hinduism,” sacrifices to silence the Evil Spirits that people sense are killing them? It is a grisly kind of balance, of course, some counter “noise” these Lone Rangers choose “to silence the deadly decibels breaking my eardrums, breaking my heart?”OK, that’s to your email of July 30. Now to the one from Aug. 2 with its eleven (11!) question marks. I’ll tackle a couple of them.

4. When I tried to do some Christian crossings to the first cremation we witnessed, I focused on two items: immortality of the soul and immutability of karmas law that you get what you deserve. Thereupon you say: “Wait a minute. Doesnt the Gospel too, and not just God’s law, says no to immortality of the soul?” Of course, it does. My point was to simplify matters by assigning the “NO” word to the law—lex semper accusat and all that—to signal that human souls are not death-proof (immune to God’s critique) any more than any other segment of a sinner is. Then for balance (oops!) I assigned the “YES” word—Yes, karma can be broken—to the Gospel. Doesn’t Paul say somewhere that Christ is God’s big Yes to us? Well, then. I wasnt anticipating such analytical readers as you are.
5. Your final set of questions addresses whether Christ’s power over the demons and disease points to a D-2 remedy,

but doesnt go all the way to the D-3 turf to remedy “our problem with God?” Ive thought about that too. When is D-3 a genuine “God-problem?” Seems to me that if the focus is on a sinner’s “faith” in the demons, even the terrified faith called fear, then that locates the matter in the human heart, D-2 turf. Whatever we “fear, love, and trust,” is what we “hang our hearts on,” someone famous once said. So FEAR of the demons is a “hang your heart” reality. All thats the language of D-2. But then again, if the focus is on our demons actually owning us, possessing us as in the recent Gospel pericope of the Canaanite womans daughter, that sounds like D-3 stuff, doesnt it? Namely, that dear daughters disconnection from her Creator-owner, and already harvesting the consequences. Is that “hell,” or isnt it? And if so, isn’t that a D-3 dilemma both for this Canaanite daughter and her mother too?

6. ‘Course, the D-2 and D-3 data are difficult to filter out cleanly from the telescoped text of the pericope, since this feisty mother comes on so strong as the gutsiest genuine disciple Christ ever had, and that right from her opening words. She makes a pitch for “mercy,” to the “Son of David” [who implements Gods Davidic mercy covenant—see 2 Samuel 7—not the Mosaic “other” one] and claims this one as her own “Lord” (=my owner). Shes coming out of D-3, but by the time we meet her, she acts and speaks as though her D-3 is already a “Yes, but...” The God-problem me thinks is not just “Now, let’s get to D-3 where we have to confront God,” but to ask in this text: Is this woman God-abandoned? Does the text point that direction? When she accepts the “dog” designation, isn’t she “same-saying” a D-3 diagnosis? Of course. But at the very moment of her same-saying this diagnosis comes her faiths feisty “But...” “Yes, the diagnosis is all true, but nevertheless I trust

that you, Master ['kyrios,' same term she used in her opening statement] supply crumbs for just such dogs. So feed me. Are you Davids Son or arent you?"

I'll stop here. Now that I think about it, Tim, your feisty questions—deep too—hint that this hero of the faith might just be somewhere back there in your own family tree. Im glad I married into your clan.

Peace & Joy!

Uncle Ed