

**‘Holding Fast’ to Principles  
or Drawing Boundaries of Exclusion?  
The Use and Misuse of the  
*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*<sup>1</sup>**

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“The [D]ao that can be told of is not the eternal [D]ao; / The name that can be named is not the eternal name.”<sup>2</sup> These opening lines of the classic Daoist text, *Laozi* (otherwise known as the *Daodejing*), speak significantly about the general relation between transcendent and mundane reality.<sup>3</sup> In what follows, I explore the import of these lines for what it means to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. The context is our ongoing Mennonite discussion of what it means to be a ‘visible church’ in relation to the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.<sup>4</sup>

It is not my intention to speak to the content of the 1995 *Confession*, but rather to examine the theoretical problems surrounding the formation and application of orthodox creedal statements. I argue that “holding fast” is not as helpful an image as that of open dialogue: creedal (or even “confessional”) statements are *both* central to our theological task *and* inherently problematic, even dangerous, when used as tools of exclusion by the power structure of an institutional church.

**Missionary Adaptation**

In the late 16th century, Jesuit missionary Mateo Ricci began his work in China by studying the language and culture, immersing himself to the extent of “going native.” Ricci was the first European to translate the classical Confucian texts, and it is to those first Latin translations that Westerners owe the names *Confucius* and *Mencius* for Kongfuzi and Mengzi respectively. The pejorative connotations of “going native” are perhaps earned when we consider the widespread condemnation of his mission’s conclusion that Chinese ancestor rites (today termed ancestor worship or ancestor veneration, depending on one’s viewpoint) were compatible with Christian practice.<sup>5</sup> But other aspects of Ricci’s program arguably presage contemporary

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missiological principles, what we might term “missionary adaptation.” As Mary Jo Weaver puts it:

Ricci’s instincts and methods are acceptable practice today: missionaries from all branches of Christianity first adapt themselves to the culture and only later begin to draw their listeners into Christianity. Missionaries encourage people to maintain their cultural identity so that their possible conversions to Christianity do not force them to abandon their heritage in order to become Christians. In Ricci’s time, however, such missionary adaptation was not possible. Roman officials were nervous about translating the Bible into Chinese because they feared that Christianity would become tainted with pagan Chinese beliefs. Vatican officials in charge of foreign missions insisted that new converts learn Latin in order to become priests and that native clergy follow the Western rules of celibacy, a practice that made no sense to the Chinese.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the overwhelming Christian consensus outside the Roman Catholic Church, not to mention current crises and controversies, the celibate priest is still regarded as the only normative Christian model by the Vatican hierarchy. Similarly, at least until the Vatican II council sessions in the early 1960s, the line was held on the orthopraxis of the Latin mass. Such entrenched yet controversial opinions on the essentials of faithfulness should provoke at least some suspicion when we evaluate absolutist claims to either orthodoxy or orthopraxy, even before considering the issue of different cultures.

One of the central problems encountered by Ricci, and by anyone attempting to translate scripture into Mandarin, is the name to be employed for God. Unlike the Qur’an, which is understood to be, as dictated to Muhammad for further transmission, the literal words of God (a characteristic that translations do not share), the Christian scriptures have always been considered open to translation. But what baggage does one accept by using either *Tian* (Heaven) or *Shangdi* (Lord on High) in the Chinese historico-linguistic context?

How does one convey meaning when the very mediators of meaning – in this case, words – are at best rough labels and symbols, already embedded

in systems of other such labels along with their practices of application?

More concretely, how are we to discern the divine message as it is mediated by the cultures, languages, and personalities of the Biblical record – most especially as it is incarnated in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ – in a way that transcends mediating particularities and that can be further understood by, and applied in, radically diverse times and cultures? At issue is the eternal divine intent for godly living and salvation as it becomes mediated through human language and manifest in human cultures and societies.

Judging from the work of missiologists like Paul Hiebert<sup>7</sup> and Charles Kraft,<sup>8</sup> who have made the discipline of anthropology central to their practices and scholarship, we could see this issue as the primary theoretical problem in carrying out the task mandated by the Great Commission. Hiebert points to Acts 15 as perhaps the earliest confrontation with the problem; the new Christian community struggled with how “Jewish” new converts had to be.<sup>9</sup> What, we must ask in missions today, is essential to living a Christian (rather than merely a Western or an American) life?<sup>10</sup> For example, could East Asians not celebrate the Lord’s Supper with rice and tea with as much authenticity of commemoration as we do, with our typical yeast bread and grape juice in lieu of the Passover-prescribed unleavened bread and wine?

### **The Essential Question**

This issue is not a problem just for missions and missiology. Missiologist Andrew Walls suggests a thought experiment wherein “a long-living, scholarly space visitor” travels to Earth at various periods in the history of Christianity.<sup>11</sup> Our “Professor of Comparative Inter-Planetary Religions” observes Christians in Jerusalem in 37 CE, at the Council of Nicea in 325, in seventh-century Ireland, and then in the modern era, encountering the global diversity of Christianity.<sup>12</sup> What, if anything, would this curious visitor conclude about the variety of Christian groups across time and place? “[W]ill our visitor,” Walls asks, “conclude that there *is* no coherence? That the use of the name Christian by such diverse groups is fortuitous, or at least misleading?”<sup>13</sup>

Walls also asks whether today’s variety of Christians might not share more things with contemporary Buddhists and Hindus than with groups

of Christians picked out across the span of history.<sup>14</sup> The source of this problem is clearly expressed by religious scholar Karen Armstrong, who characterizes the Islamic perspective on the global plurality of cultures, noting that “they might express the truths of God’s religion differently, but essentially the message was always the same.”<sup>15</sup> Walls, who would relate the first half of this claim to what he calls “the indigenizing principle,” explains that this principle “ensures that each community recognizes in Scripture that God is speaking to its own situation. But it also means that we all approach Scripture wearing cultural blinkers, with assumptions determined by our time and place.”<sup>16</sup>

A crucial tension exists between this “indigenizing” principle and the corresponding “universalizing” principle (the second half of Armstrong’s claim). In Buddhism, the indigenizing principle is referred to as *upaya*, “skillfull means,”<sup>17</sup> and is often exemplified by a story in the *Lotus Sutra*, a Mahayana text in which a man lies to his children as an expedient means of saving them from a burning building.<sup>18</sup> *Upaya* thus represents a pragmatic emphasis on whatever works as an effective means of salvation, regardless of its relation to ultimate truth, and may be used to justify a wide range of contradictory and even proscribed practices so long as they achieve their goal.<sup>19</sup> Such an approach is perhaps not surprising for a religious tradition stressing impermanence, “emptiness,” and no-self, and that generally eschews essentialism. One might almost expect this tradition to deconstruct itself,<sup>20</sup> and an appropriate question is whether the historical Buddha Siddhartha would recognize his teachings in all the extant traditions bearing the Buddhist label.<sup>21</sup>

Now, the same question could be asked about Christ and the diversity of groups currently and historically bearing his name. Is there not (or should there not) be something more to Christianity than mere historical continuity with the person of Jesus? The central component holding together the diverse Indian traditions under the dubious label “Hinduism” is mere acceptance of the canonicity of the Vedas.<sup>22</sup> Yet when examining the details of beliefs, practices, and self-identification of the various Indian sub-traditions, the impression may be one of historical accident more than perceptible unity. In the Christian tradition such a result would be completely unsatisfying to anyone who believes that Jesus Christ had a definitive mission.

This brings us back to the second part of Armstrong's assertion: the universal, univocal nature of God's will. I am not denying the essential reality of Christ's purpose, message, and saving act, anymore than the author of my opening lines above denied the essential reality of the transcendent Dao. And this accords neatly with a long tradition of apophatic Christian theology, exemplified in scholastic thought by the term *via negativa*. As with the scholastics' recognition that finite human language cannot adequately describe the transcendent character of God, therefore restricting claims to stating what God is *not*, I am simply denying our ability to definitively grasp and articulate God's intent for all time and all contexts.<sup>23</sup> To paraphrase Laozi, "The Word that can be confessed is not the eternal Word."

### **Through a Glass Darkly**

To some, the diversity of interpretation and application of Christ's message through time and across the globe proves the "absolute" relativity of culture and meaning; to others, it emphasizes how privileged they are to have the only true and correct interpretation of God's self-revelation. To the rest of us, the transcendent will of God must be mediated through the mundane – through contexts, cultures, languages, worldviews, and personal experiences and perspectives. An excellent demonstration of this view is found in the impressive recent experiment in intercultural reading, *Through the Eyes of Another*, with results and interpretive essays published in a volume of the same name.<sup>24</sup>

Participants in this project found they gained new insights into scriptural passages as they read them together.<sup>25</sup> Diverse backgrounds allowed interacting groups to see the cultural, educational, and socio-economic assumptions through which they were each reading the Bible in a way that opened them up to new understandings, both about the other groups and the meanings of the passages. As Rainer Kessler reports,

The question is not, Who is right? There are many aspects to be discovered in the text. By the process of intercultural Bible reading, we learn that our own reading is only one reading among many others.... In the traditional model, the ideal was to read the text without any prejudice—*sine ira et studio*. We have since learned that this ideal is not attainable: the supposedly

neutral reader is in reality the European or North American professor.... The new lesson taught by intercultural Bible reading is that it is not enough to say who I am as a reader of the text. I must also listen to other readers from different contexts. Without their voices, I will not be able to listen to the full voice of the text that I wish to understand.<sup>26</sup>

It is important to note the multiplicity of the readings and the singularity of the “full voice.”

Along these lines Andrew Walls describes another thought experiment involving a play given in a strange theater somewhat reminiscent of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave,<sup>27</sup> a theater where no one has a full view of the stage.<sup>28</sup> As part of the drama of life, we witness what Walls calls “the Jesus Act,” a crucial moment that is similarly viewed in a limited manner. But Walls claims (reminiscent of Hans-Georg Gadamer)<sup>29</sup> that

This limitation is a necessary feature of our hearing the Gospel at all. For the Gospel is not a voice from heaven separate from the rest of reality; it is not an alternative or supplementary programme to the drama of life which we are watching. The Jesus Act, the Gospel, is *in the play*. That is the implication of the Incarnation. It has to be received, therefore, under the same conditions as we received other communication, through the medium of the same faculties and capacities. We hear and respond to the Gospel, we read and listen to Scriptures, in terms of our accumulated experience and perceptions of the world.<sup>30</sup>

The effect of this image is like that of the Indian story about the blind men who have different perceptions of an elephant, based on their ability to touch only the part of the animal closest to them.<sup>31</sup> However, Walls suggests that those viewing this play can improve their understanding by comparing notes outside the theater.

The notion of “holding fast”<sup>32</sup> assumes we have correctly grasped some truth and have since discovered no errors in interpretation or judgment regarding application. However, I question our ability to know this with any certainty.<sup>33</sup> I, for one, would like to waste no time in abandoning a position I later came to see was erroneous. So, “holding fast” is admirable when it

implies steadfast adherence to the truth, but not so admirable when it means blind clinging to our own judgments, surely just another form of idolatry.

There is no theology that is not a human interpretation; there is no magic hermeneutic key that guarantees right interpretation.<sup>34</sup> Our interpretation is limited and human, but it is our responsibility to pursue and live it out as best we can. Our believers church understanding necessarily stresses the possibility, contra Augustine, of a “visible church.”<sup>35</sup> If the church is the body of Christ, the manifest in-breaking (however flawed) of the Reign of God, then the church’s responsibility is to live out that role as well as it can, by creating a community that reflects that godly understanding.

### **The Visible Church**

However, the task of maintaining a pure community – the task of discipling the brothers and sisters of congregations and the congregations within the fellowship of the wider church – is inevitably complicated by the reality of power dynamics. Creeds in particular have been divisive tools of power from the very beginning of Christian history: The first council (in Nicea) was called by Emperor Constantine as a political means of ending fractious controversies, though it ended in the imposed exiles of Arius and Eusebius. In subsequent meetings between Orthodox and Roman Christians, it is said that “they argued as heatedly about relatively peripheral matters—the kind of bread to use for the Eucharist, whether to allow priests to have beards—as they did about more substantial things like the *filioque* clause in the Nicene Creed . . . and clerical celibacy.”<sup>36</sup> After the eventual East-West schism, Karen Armstrong reports that Roman Christians received Muslim conquerors with relief in those lands where Greek Orthodoxy had ruled, because the Orthodox had persecuted them for their heretical opinions.<sup>37</sup>

Those of us from the Anabaptist and Mennonite tradition may recognize the hindsight with which we can declare heatedly disputed issues “peripheral.” Our history is replete with bitter divisions, mutual excommunications, church splits, and intra-family bans over various issues of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. But how many of those controversies, which at the time were seen as of utmost consequence, would we today feel were worth the inevitable damaging effects? Also, as Hans-Jürgen Goertz notes, while the early Anabaptists complained about the abuse of power the

magisterial churches practiced in their scriptural interpretation, this did not prevent the Anabaptists from misusing the Bible as a tool of power when they had the opportunity themselves.<sup>38</sup>

I am thus concerned by potential use of the *Confession of Faith* as a litmus test for employment in church institutions and as a means of disciplining, excluding, or silencing member congregations by conferences using the Mennonite Church USA’s “Membership Guidelines.”<sup>39</sup> The history of confession-signing requirements is not a happy one, nor one that I wish to see repeated. But I do not intend to imply that issues currently of concern in relation to the *Confession* – primarily homosexuality – are peripheral, or that the current formulation has obviously and conclusively gotten this wrong. The issues are important, and the discussions difficult and complicated. My argument is that both the traditionalist insistence on a definitively normative expression and the liberal presumption that all progress is *eo ipso* worthy are equally misguided. However impressive the evidence may be regarding a historical propensity for shifting public consciousness on various ostensibly “liberal” positions, it does not constitute an argument (either normative or predictive) in favor of any subsequent shift.<sup>40</sup>

### Seeking an Alternative Model

Given the fallibility and limitations of our interpretive faculties, and given the power dynamics and questions of harm inextricably bound up in these questions, we should seek a polity, a way of being the visible church, that eschews “holding fast” to lines drawn in the sand in favor of an alternative model of an open hermeneutic community of interpretation.

I must clarify here what I think the problem is with the present model. It is certainly true that any means of *self-identification* will inevitably involve *separation*; that is, after all, integral to the process. It is also true that the issue is not reducible to the self-identity of a group but to our very pressing responsibility to live out our commission: *Nachfolge Christi* as individuals and the visible *body of Christ* on a corporate level. Michael King identifies the tension I intend:

For 500 Years Anabaptist-Mennonites have stressed faithful living *and* community. We have believed we must practice what we preach in relationship with each other. Sadly, we

have often been true to our ethical stances while violating our vision of mutual accountability. Repeatedly we have disagreed regarding how to be faithful. Frequently we have resolved the clash by affirming our own stand at the expense of continuing fellowship. We see this in the history of splits in denominations, conferences, congregations, and even families which continue to this day. Is there another path? Is there a peacemaking way forward which allows us, members of a historic peace church, not to hate but to love the enemies we make of each other? Is there a way *to be true to our deepest commitments without splitting from those whose passions don't match ours?*<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, the issue is not merely one of self-identity but of ethics and faithful (corporate) living. I concur with King when he says he is “[s]eeking ways to live together without losing our own hearings of the gospel”<sup>42</sup>; our faith commitments are important, and I am not interested in an “anything goes” Christianity. I am concerned about the task of responsible, theological discernment. But I also agree that “the effort to remain in relationship is worth making.”<sup>43</sup> The problem with the separation implicit in self-identity is not the necessity of distinction, or even the integrity of faith commitments, but the violence inherent in the means of separation through the imposition of power.<sup>44</sup>

Here I return to the alternative model of “an open hermeneutical community of interpretation.” It is no coincidence that Mahatma Gandhi saw epistemic humility as part of the *ahimsa* principle informing his pacifist *satyagrahas*.<sup>45</sup> The most dangerous people in the world are surely those so certain of the truth that they are willing to kill based on this certainty. Violence of any kind is the paradigmatic example of privileging one’s own perspective.<sup>46</sup> Adopting a principle of epistemic humility would make listening to other perspectives, as advocated modestly by the intercultural reading project, an epistemic imperative, just as listening to other voices is a moral imperative in the servant model of living the Jesus way.

### **Theoretical Ideal or Realistic Possibility?**

The perennial question, when Christians speak of *really* living the Jesus way, is whether this is indeed practicable. On the one hand, the question

itself can represent a dangerous attempt to covertly introduce a different set of evaluative criteria from an opposing worldview. Living out an ideal of loving nonviolence, this view might say, is fine for isolated communities choosing it as a form of Christian vocation (much the view of Reinhold Niebuhr, for example), but it is not practical for life in the larger world, and it is naïve to think there is *always* a nonviolent response to violence that will *work*. It is in the consequentialist evaluation of “working” where the world’s criteria sneak in. How are we, in the case of the visible body of Christ, supposed to evaluate what “works”?

On the other hand, we must confront this question squarely. We must move beyond the false dilemma of faithfulness versus effectiveness by challenging the worldview from which the dilemma is posed. Indeed, interpretations of God’s intent for living in the world must demonstrate their capacity for effecting God’s Reign. Further, it is a fair enough question when a novel interpretation claims to offer a better model for being community while lacking a concrete example to appeal to. So, to the very important question of how such a model can work towards a visible church (our imperfect community is inevitably made up of imperfect persons and imperfect congregations), the answer I am suggesting is one of self-selection around a theme (cf. Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblances”)<sup>47</sup> rather than imposed boundaries of principles that exclude and are maintained by power structures and ecclesial policing. Those who recognize in the current gathered body and confession document enough of their own faith identity that they will commit to working in community on the ongoing process of discernment should be included in the conversation.

Self-selection – and therefore *self-exclusion* – rather than imposed exclusion should be the mode of inclusion for this open alternative model. On a smaller scale, this is (within limits) how congregations already operate in practice with regard to admitting members. Let the tasks of correction and discipling happen in conversation rather than through the exercise of power. What little exemplification of mutual care still occurring in congregations is done this way. If this open model seems too loose for church conferences, I would further suggest that this is already how the church structure operates on the denominational level. What *conference* has yet been excluded (from above) because of its views, say, on women in leadership? For the

most part, denominations, conferences, and congregations operate on a principle of overlapping consensus,<sup>48</sup> not on a requirement of absolute unity that chooses to expel the impure who dissent but rather with enough common understanding to proceed with the tasks of corporate living and discernment.

However, despite the similarity to actual practice, the idea of *self-consciously* adopting overlapping consensus as a guiding principle might still be seen as an invitation to chaos, where the church becomes a rudderless ship with the potential to follow the currents of contemporary culture anywhere. Abandon the essentialist anchor of the creed and we abandon ourselves to drifting. But this objection misses the reality that such drift could happen (and arguably does happen) anyway: If a majority of members, congregations, or conferences decided the peace position was hopelessly idealistic and must be altered, the confession of faith endorsed by the denomination would in due course be altered to fit. Recall also that the Church of the Brethren is historically as a denomination fundamentally anti-creedal. They do indeed have disagreements within the denomination over the historic peace position,<sup>49</sup> but they seem to function as a viable institution. Moreover, I am not advocating we discard the role of creeds in our theology; rather I am affirming we use the *Confession of Faith* as a focus for our collective discernment.

The larger import of the objection appears to miss the point entirely. Concern about losing our Anabaptist peace position (or any other “essential”) in the ongoing process of discernment by an open hermeneutical community presumes precisely what I am denying (despite my personal conviction about our peace witness), namely that we can have absolute, certain, timeless knowledge about God’s will, and that we can make this list of essentials and refute any model of community failing to safeguard them. The object of the model I propose is not the denunciation of collective discernment but of the use of power that accompanies organizing an institution around such discernment as though it were absolute, timeless truth. Surely the one thing such use of power guarantees is that errors will persist, because those who disagree are excluded from further participation in the community of discernment.<sup>50</sup>

Certainly, such a model risks including only those who see the value of such an open hermeneutic, but what other choice is there in this respect?

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When the intent is to avoid the rupture of community by enforced exclusion, it seems unhelpful to suggest that those unsatisfied with open discernment will leave (voluntarily) and to call this a shortcoming. The important question here is which model more effectively realizes the Jesus way of living. I contend that the ban as historically employed has been a disastrous, damaging experiment which has paradoxically turned attempts to purify the visible body of Christ into dismal failures at following Jesus’ teachings. Recalling King’s terms, it is not “faithful living” *or* “community,” because our model for ethical integrity calls us to be peacemakers.<sup>51</sup>

### **Confession in a Meta-traditional Perspective**

Given this essay’s methodology and argumentation, some readers may want to ask where I personally stand in respect to the tradition out of which I am speaking. After all, I claim there is no absolute perspective we can occupy to obtain absolute knowledge, no “God’s-eye view” from which to stand above it all and speak from outside any particular tradition. This is, of course, correct; but to conclude from this that we can say nothing at all about traditions in the abstract, nor apply this understanding to our own tradition, would be absurdly illegitimate.<sup>52</sup>

We should immediately suspect a theoretical claim that so clearly contradicts the plain sense of the evidence: All the examples given, from my opening line onward, seem straightforwardly and appropriately relevant to our Christian discussion of the transcendent and the mundane, regardless of the tradition from which they came.<sup>53</sup> Put simply, the objection contends that, on the basis of a view of tradition in the abstract, one cannot logically make claims transcending the perspective of one’s own tradition (i.e., claims about tradition in the abstract). But this means the objection is itself appealing to a perspective from which, *ex hypothesi*, it cannot possibly be speaking – exactly that very “meta-traditional” perspective.<sup>54</sup>

Even if this were not so, such arguments inevitably founder on the shoals of concrete reality, which refuses to conform to the essentialism implicit in the analysis of traditions (and their perspectives) as reified entities. Traditions are amorphous, dynamic, and multivocal fields of activity with porous boundaries that institutions try to reify and rigidify. This is perfectly natural, and we do well to attempt our collective discernment of God’s will

for us as a visible body of Christ and to organize our community around that understanding. The error lies in being so sure we have grasped it that we are willing to enact the violence of throwing the first stone.<sup>55</sup> Confession in a meta-traditional perspective is aware that all confession is done from within a particular perspective (the Word confessed is not the eternal Word), and is thus open to learning from other perspectives. This is the essence of an open hermeneutical model, as exemplified by Andrew Walls's audience comparing notes outside the theater.<sup>56</sup>

### **Conclusions**

I hope my position, suspended as it is in a tension between simpler extremes, is clear. By advocating an open hermeneutical model, I intend to hold together, on the one hand, both faithful discernment towards ethical living and mutual admonition, and, on the other hand, nonviolent forbearance of epistemic humility that might preserve a community.

If I were forced to say whether I agree unequivocally with the 1995 *Confession of Faith*, I would answer that I do not. But if permitted, I would pose these questions: Do I recognize the tradition that it stands in as my own? Do I wish to continue in fellowship – in communion – with those who wrote it, and to further the dialogue and discernment always necessary now and in the future? Do I accept the confession as a working document that represents our best current collective understanding? Then I could clearly answer that I do. My fervent hope is that the free church and peace church tradition that we call Anabaptist and Mennonite can finally move beyond the idolatry of the creed and the violence of the ban.

We do need a confession of faith as the focus of a continual process of discernment. It can provide our current best articulation of the good news to which we hope to bear witness; it can provide a basis for further conversation to start; and it can offer the overlapping consensus on the themes of our identity as an open hermeneutic community of faith. In a believers church, we must recognize the value of freedom of self-discernment, freedom to dissent, and diverse perspectives in offering new insights for our collective process of faithful discernment. We must never lose sight of the fact that we are “holding fast” to God’s will as we can best discern it, and not to our tentatively grasped conception as seen “through a glass darkly”<sup>57</sup> and expressed in a temporally-located confession document.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper was presented on 9 June 2006 at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, for a consultation on *The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.

<sup>2</sup> Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *The Way of Lao Tzu (Tao-te ching)* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 97.

<sup>3</sup> Insofar as this is a concern common to all religious and philosophical traditions tracing significant aspects of their formation to what Karl Jaspers has labelled the “Axial Age,” it is appropriate and instructive to contemplate how other axial traditions have grappled with analogous issues (whether seen as “same” or “parallel”). I say more on this below. On the tension between transcendence and mundane reality as an axial theme, see S.N. Eisenstadt, “Introduction: The Axial Age Breakthroughs—Their Characteristics and Origins,” *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*, ed. S.N. Eisenstadt (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), 1-8.

<sup>4</sup> *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Ricci himself apparently had reservations on this point. See Justo González, *A History of Christian Thought: From the Protestant Reformation to the Twentieth Century* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 402-03.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Jo Weaver, *Introduction to Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1998), 185-86.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985); *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994); and *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts: Affirming Truth in a Modern/Postmodern World* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Charles Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights*, 29.

<sup>10</sup> Hiebert refers to the discernment of divine intent within the cultural context as “critical contextualization.” See his *Anthropological Insights*, 171-92.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History* (New York: Random House, 2002), 8.

<sup>16</sup> Walls, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom refer to this as “the principle of accommodation or expedient means” in *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From Earliest Times to 1600*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1999), 446.

<sup>18</sup> The relevant section is excerpted, with an explanation, in James Fieser and John Powers, eds., *Scriptures of the East* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 104-06.

<sup>19</sup> See Masao Abe's discussion of *upaya* in relation to the varieties of Buddhism in "Buddhism," *Our Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 71-73, 91, 99, 126-28.

<sup>20</sup> Abe briefly discusses a similar question regarding the Buddhist *Sangha* in op. cit., 126.

<sup>21</sup> Ronald Eyre poses a similar question in "Buddhism: The Land of the Disappearing Buddha—Japan," v. 9, *The Long Search*, Time-Life Video, 1977.

<sup>22</sup> Perhaps complicating matters further, even this minimal requirement is often nominal at best. See Arvind Sharma, "Hinduism," *Our Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 5.

<sup>23</sup> George Lindbeck contends that even a statement as simple as "Christ is Lord" is necessarily embedded in a much larger set of interpretive understandings: "The crusader's battle cry '*Christus est Dominus*,' for example, is false when used to authorize cleaving the skull of an infidel (even though the same words in other contexts may be a true utterance)." George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 64. The effect of this problem is neither trivial nor ultimately dissoluble.

<sup>24</sup> Hans de Wit, Louis Jonker, Marleen Kool, and Daniel Schipani, eds. *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Hans de Wit, "Through the Eyes of Another: Objectives and Backgrounds" in *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible* (see note 24).

<sup>26</sup> Rainer Kessler, "From Bipolar to Multipolar Understanding: Hermeneutical Consequences of Intercultural Bible Reading," in *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, 458.

<sup>27</sup> See Plato's *Republic*, Book 7 (514a-520a).

<sup>28</sup> Walls, 43-46.

<sup>29</sup> See primarily Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> Walls, 44.

<sup>31</sup> As the story goes (one version), the blind man feeling the ear says the elephant is like a fan; the one feeling the side, like a wall; the one feeling the leg, like a tree trunk, and the one feeling the tail, like a rope. For the Jains, from whom this story may originate, it illustrates *anekantavada*, the non-absolute nature of our perspectives (or the multi-faceted nature of reality), where each perspective represents a portion of the whole truth. See Walter Benesch, *An Introduction to Comparative Philosophy: A Travel Guide to Philosophical Space* (New York: Palgrave, 1997), 130ff.; also Bimal Krishna Matilal, *The Central Philosophy of Jainism (Anekanta-Vada)* (Ahmedabad: Institute of Indology, 1981).

<sup>32</sup> This paper's title refers to the conference at which a shorter version was presented. The official consultation title was "Holding Fast to the Confession of Our Hope: The *Confession of Faith* Ten Years Later," itself a reference to Heb.10:23 in the NRSV.

<sup>33</sup> I am not denying truth or even the possibility of knowledge. I am denying the possibility of Cartesian-style knowledge that is absolute and certain because it is based on indubitable foundations. There is nothing novel about this in contemporary thought; the important thing is applying it to our theological discussions in a way that still affirms the possibility

of knowledge. (Through his appropriation of the epistemological model known as “critical realism,” I take Hiebert to be making exactly the same argument in the three texts cited above. See especially Hiebert, *Missiological Implications*, 68-116.) While we can know (though such knowledge is always embedded within an epistemic framework), we can never *know* that we know. My claim is that we can never have “strong knowledge,” according to the terminology coined by Norman Malcolm in “Knowledge and Belief,” *Mind* 61.242 (April 1952): 178-89.

<sup>34</sup> Brevard Childs makes a similar claim in *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 15; see also David Kratz Mathies, “Reading the Moral Law: A Hermeneutical Approach to Religious Moral Epistemology,” *CGR* 23.3 (2005): 74-84.

<sup>35</sup> Alister McGrath explains the opposition between the Donatist notion of “pure body” against Augustine’s “mixed body,” matching the former with Menno’s “assembly of the righteous” in *Christianity: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 157. For Augustine, the true church would be the “invisible church” hidden within the universal church, a “mixed body.”

<sup>36</sup> Weaver, 73.

<sup>37</sup> Armstrong, 31.

<sup>38</sup> Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, trans. Trevor Johnson (New York: Routledge, 1996), 50-53.

<sup>39</sup> Whatever the intent of the Guidelines, they make explicit appeal to the authority of the *Confession* as the “teaching position of the Mennonite Church USA,” an appeal which has been used to legitimate the role of the *Confession* as authoritative litmus test. See Mennonite Church USA, “Membership Guidelines for the Formation of Mennonite Church USA”: [http://www.mennoniteusa.org/doc\\_files/membership\\_guidelines/membershipguidelines.pdf](http://www.mennoniteusa.org/doc_files/membership_guidelines/membershipguidelines.pdf).

<sup>40</sup> For an interesting discussion of hindsight, foresight, and faithful discernment, see Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 39-41.

<sup>41</sup> Michael King, *Fractured Dance: Gadamer and a Mennonite Conflict over Homosexuality* (Telford, PA: Pandora, 2001), 240, emphasis his.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>44</sup> For a general discussion of the various categories of violence, see J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 7-9; for a discussion of violence focused on church discipline, purity, and creeds, see Peter Smith, “The Temptation to Scapegoating: A Theological Analysis of the Practice of Mennonite Church Discipline,” presented at the consultation “Holding Fast to the Confession of Our Hope: The *Confession of Faith* Ten Years Later” (Elkhart, Indiana, 9 June 2006), text available at [www.ambs.edu/files/confession/smith.pdf](http://www.ambs.edu/files/confession/smith.pdf).

<sup>45</sup> Bhikhu Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi’s Political Discourse* (New Delhi: Sage, 1989), 156.

<sup>46</sup> I argue elsewhere that the sincere realization of this point suggests at the least a *prima facie* bias against violence. See David Kratz Mathies, “Does the Ballot Box Lie Outside the Perfection of Christ?” *CGR* 21.2 (2003): 107. The corollary for this context would be a *prima*

*facie* bias against breaking fellowship through coercion (by institutional action) and for paying special attention to the voices of those potentially the victims of power (a preferential option, of sorts, for the marginalized).

<sup>47</sup> More concretely than just “cluster concepts,” I have in mind “theme” as explicated by A.S. Cua. See Antonio S. Cua, *Moral Vision and Tradition: Essays in Chinese Ethics* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1998), 31.

<sup>48</sup> An overlapping consensus on the model of family resemblances or a cluster concept would not have any central core – as is aimed for in a creedal statement or confession document – for the possibility of articulating a definitive essence is what I am denying, since we lack any *a priori* principle for timeless and error-free discernment. As this is a result of our finitude, it does not absolve us of the responsibility of faithful discernment, in an attitude of humble attention to our different perspectives on God’s will.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Dale Brown, *Biblical Pacifism: A Peace Church Perspective* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1986), 1-39.

<sup>50</sup> In his discussion of “metatheology” as a step beyond his “critical contextualization,” Hiebert notes that “The priesthood of believers must be exercised within a hermeneutical community.” His view of this community includes principles of interpretive humility, testing with wider perspectives, and discernment as an ongoing process. See Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 102-03.

<sup>51</sup> Given the way Jesus treated tax collectors and other outsiders – nor should we forget the Great Commission as instruction on how to treat ‘pagans’ – the irrevocable rupture caused by the traditional Anabaptist interpretation of Matt.18:17 (i.e., the ban) has never been compelling to me. See also Peter Smith (Note 44 above), 3 and 11.

<sup>52</sup> Technically, this is self-contradictory and not even capable of begging the question. The best way to show this is to demonstrate that it reduces to an absurd conclusion (*reductio ad absurdum*), hence my strong claim that it is absurdly illegitimate despite being a rather widely held view. The argument could be repaired to an extent, but the effect would be that any claim to grounds for the starting point (i.e., observations about traditions in the abstract) would apply to my own use as well.

<sup>53</sup> The objection thus seems susceptible to the “G.E. Moore Shift,” since the evidence available is no less compelling than the starting premises of the argument under consideration. For a brief discussion of the application of this form of argument, see William L. Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1978), 90-92.

<sup>54</sup> The ancient Daoist sage Zhuangzi encountered a similar argument with his friend Huizi, who insisted that Zhuangzi could not possibly understand the mind of a fish because he was not himself a fish. Zhuangzi pointed out that by Huizi’s own reasoning, Huizi could not possibly know what Zhuangzi was able to understand because *he* was not Zhuangzi. Chapter 17: “Season of Autumn Floods,” Martin Palmer et al., trans., *The Book of Chuang Tzu* (London: Penguin, 1996), 147. Cf. also Ben-Ami Scharfstein, “The Contextual Fallacy,” *Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*, ed. Gerald James Larson and Eliot Deutsch (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1988), 88-9.

<sup>55</sup> John 8:1-11.

<sup>56</sup> The middle ground recognizes there is no neutral or absolute perspective while allowing

we are not so bound by our perspective that we cannot learn from others or learn about the nature of perspective in the first place. This is more than just implicit in Gadamer's references to expanding horizons through fusion with others. The common error is in reifying those perspectives or the traditions they are grounded in. On Gadamer's notion of expanding horizons, see Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 265-71.

<sup>57</sup> 1 Cor. 13:12.

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