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RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND PUBLIC PASTORAL THEOLOGY: IS IT TIME FOR A COMPARATIVE THEOLOGICAL PARADIGM?

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Effective public pastoral theology in multi- and inter-religious contexts engages the richness of, is accountable to, and practices mutuality among myriad religious traditions, yet the risk of perpetuating Christian privilege is high. How, then, can pastoral theology address public issues for the benefit of all people without perpetuating Christian privilege or colonizing other religious traditions? My public theological response to a community conflict in Orange County's Little Saigon caused me to reconsider existing pastoral theological resources for public theology in the contexts of religious diversity and multiple religious bonds. I suggest a comparative theological paradigm—a “caring across traditions” that attends to and engages theological constructs in other religious traditions—as a complement to the communal-contextual and intercultural paradigms.

KEYWORDS: *Public theology, comparative theology, interfaith, inter-religious, religious diversity, communal-contextual, intercultural, spiritual care, pastoral care, GLBT inclusion, Little Saigon*

The most important holiday in Vietnamese culture—and therefore the most important holiday for the worldwide Vietnamese diaspora—is the lunar New Year, known as Tet. People from all religious traditions participate. Preparation begins two or three weeks in advance. People cook special foods, clean the house and home altar, pay off debts, buy new clothes, decorate, and wait for relatives to come home. Local transportation networks and international flights groan as people return to family. During the holiday itself, the entire country stops. Businesses and offices close completely for at least three days. People cease cleaning and sweeping to visit relatives and neighbors, honor ancestors, go to temples and pilgrimage sites, journey to cemeteries, offer children red envelopes stuffed with money, light firecrackers, bang drums and gongs, and have their fortunes told. Neighborhoods

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hold parades that feature noise makers, masks, and traditional lion dances. People blast out the Abba song “Happy New Year”. Imagine Christmas, Thanksgiving, May Day, Easter, New Year's Eve, and Halloween all mixed into a single celebration of spring's arrival—that is what Tet is like.

The largest (and longest continuous) Tet celebration outside of Vietnam takes place in Orange County, California. It includes cultural immersion, *pho*-eating contests, lion dances, and a beauty pageant (Lam, 2015). Each year, nearly 100,000 people visit the three-day festival (Union of the Vietnamese Student Associations of Southern California, n.d.). About 200,000 Vietnamese-Americans live in and around Little Saigon, the center of the local diaspora, the capitol of Vietnamese-America, and the largest Vietnamese community outside Vietnam. Smaller Tet celebrations, including an annual parade in Little Saigon, occur across Orange County.

The Little Saigon parade, attended by as many as 10,000 people each year, celebrates the entire Vietnamese-American community, and for three years (2010, 2011, and 2012) the Partnership of Viet Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Organizations marched with everyone else. Their inclusion prompted objections from some Vietnamese-American religious leaders and a call for a boycott by the Vietnamese Interfaith Council of Southern California (Kopetman, 2013b; Kao, 2014), but the city refused to exclude queer¹ Viets from the civic event and the boycott was largely ignored.

In 2013, however, responsibility for the parade shifted from city to private sponsorship by a group of older, conserving immigrants that included members of the interfaith council. The new sponsor voted to exclude gays and lesbians, saying “LGBT is not a part of the Vietnamese culture” (Murray, 2014).² Immediately after this, other parade participants threatened to withdraw. A school district halted its support (Do, 2013a), and two local politicians canceled their scheduled appearances (Kopetman, 2013a). Elected officials, religious leaders, the local school board, and the Vietnamese-American Chamber of Commerce of Orange County contacted the planning committee in support of queer inclusion.

Instead, the planning committee asked the Partnership to hold its own parade 30 minutes before or after the official event—a “separate but equal” solution. When queer Viets refused, a Lutheran bishop told them to “sacrifice” themselves for the good of the community. His statement reflected Confucian norms, which shape Vietnamese cultures and encourage people to sacrifice their lives, if necessary, to uphold morality (Do, 2013a).

PUBLIC PASTORAL THEOLOGY: ITS ROLE, SETTING, AND CHALLENGE

This conflict, initiated by Buddhist, Christian, and Taoist religious leaders, offers rich opportunity for theological reflection. It touches topics as diverse as sexuality, inclusion, theological anthropology, power, privilege, exile, the interplay of religion and culture, and sacrifice as a religious and cultural virtue. Here, however, I use the conflict to reflect on public theology—specifically, the meaning and practice of public pastoral theology in the midst of religious diversity. How can the parade

controversy interrogate, inform, and reform our efforts to bring the best of Christian pastoral theological reflection to bear on public issues for the benefit of the people of all religions?

Understandings of public theology, its purposes, and nature vary across continents and among academic disciplines. Some scholars position public theology as a public reflection on religious constructs, while others see it as a constructive critique of culture and policy from religious perspectives. Feminist and pastoral theologians link public theology and liberation theology, suggesting that its pastoral concerns are fundamentally tied to issues of social justice (Miller-McLemore, 2004, 2005; Thomson, 2008). Others suggest that the interdisciplinary nature of public theology makes it related to, if not located in, the field of practical theology (Beauregard, 2007; Thomson, 2008).

Whatever its frame, public theology involves the tension of appealing to the particular and the universal at the same time (Graham, 2013; Hermans, 2005). In the United States, three factors heighten this tension. First, to engage non-Christian spiritualities complicates the discourse of public theology exponentially (Doak, 2004). Second, public theology in the United States unfolds not only amidst religious plurality, but also in a cultural milieu that is (a) concerned historically with limiting religion's public influence, while (b) currently subjugating public good to private concerns (Doak, 2004). Third, public theology that emerges from Christian traditions carries limited authority in a post-Christian culture: it is easy to dismiss.

From my perspective, public theology³ consists of critical and constructive theological reflection on culture and on public, social, and economic policies and discourses (Cameron, Reader, & Slater, 2012; Graham, 2013). It works to promote the public good, alleviate suffering, and disclose misuses of power that restrict justice, reconciliation, and abundant life (Thomas, 2008, p. 276). Although public theology draws on multiple disciplines, it emphasizes and privileges spiritual and religious resources (including texts, traditions, and practices). For me, public theology is not limited to "critical and constructive reflection upon particular religions" (Miller-McLemore, 2005, p. 98), but at its best reaches beyond religious and spiritual communities to generate "informed understandings of the theological and religious dimensions of public issues and develop... analysis and critique in language that is accessible across disciplines and faith-traditions" (Graham, 2013, p. 18). Thus, public theology resists "confessional and authoritarian forms of reasoning and argumentation" to be accessible and compelling to people in and beyond religious communities (Cady, 2014, p. 295).

Within this general frame, public *pastoral* theology speaks broadly to human responsibility and action directed towards care for each other and for the cosmos. It involves critical and constructive reflection on the implicit (and sometimes explicit) assumptions about care embedded in culture, policy, and public discourse. As such, public pastoral theology moves beyond individual and ecclesial (Scheib, 2002) contexts for care, emphasizing societal, institutional, and broadly public practices of care. Nonetheless, its reflections and recommendations remain connected to Christian norms and communities. One of the key tasks of public pastoral theology, as I see it, is to develop theologies and practices for our common life and the common good in light of expressions of care developed in and directed towards Christian community. Bonnie Miller-McLemore (2004, pp. 62–63), for example,

identifies public pastoral theology as an expression of contemporary modes of care, especially resistance, empowerment, and liberation. She writes:

While these new functions do not replace the prior ones or exhaust the implications of pastoral theology as public theology, they provide a good sense of the direction toward which pastoral theology as public theology points caregivers. These functions provide alternative means to achieving healing, guidance, sustenance, and reconciliation that require fresh public understanding and response. (p. 63)

In my view, the pragmatic and constructive task of public pastoral theology is actively prophetic; it imagines and builds better worlds⁴ by articulating and vivifying futures that allow all of creation to flourish. When pastoral theologians engage in public theology, we are not “weighing in”, remediating, or correcting society and its policies, but identifying how religious habits, perspectives, and practices can help create “outposts of paradise” (Brock & Parker, 2008) in the midst of common life. Thus, public pastoral theology is scholarship and practice oriented towards *forming the future* (Gergen, 2014), and its eschatological imperative and anticipatory actions (Gorsuch, 2001) are perhaps distinctively Christian contributions to religious conversations about the common good.

Yet, how effective can pastoral theology be in the public sphere? The discipline remains largely unknown, marginalized in church and academy, and strongly identified with Christian ministry and the church. It lacks cultural, public, and ecclesial authority, and the practice of *public* pastoral theology carries inherent—often unintentional—risks. Kathleen Greider (2012), Daniel Schipani (2013), Dagmar Grefe (2011), and others warn that we risk imposing Christian values, norms, and privilege on people and communities whose life-giving perspectives contribute to the common good but challenge Christian perspectives. (For example, understandings of health informed by a Christian doctrine of salvation might be considered insufficient or even delusional by Buddhists, who understand health as non-dual wisdom and a particular form of liberation.) Emmanuel Lartey (2006, 2013) suggests that we also risk colonizing or marginalizing religious, non-religious, and ethical–philosophical voices that are not dominant or privileged. (Consider, for example, the ways in which Muslims as a targeted religious community can be silenced by well-intentioned Christian attempts to resist discourses of Islamophobia.) These risks, when actualized, further weaken pastoral theology's credibility as public theology in religiously diverse contexts. Another complicating factor is the intersection of race, ethnicity, and religion in pluralistic settings. (Pastoral theology seems well positioned and prepared to address this issue, and intersectional theorists include religion as an aspect of the ideological domain (Ramsay, 2014), but I am not aware of substantial conversations about convergences among race, ethnicity, and religion.) So how do pastoral theologians address public issues for the benefit of all people without perpetuating Christian privilege or minimizing the wisdom of other religious traditions? How do we speak with credibility from a (predominately white and) Christian perspective in a heterogeneous, multi-religious, and inter-religious culture?

ADVOCATING FOR QUEER VIETS: PUBLIC PASTORAL THEOLOGY AND LITTLE SAIGON

These questions challenged me as I considered a public theological response to the conflict in Little Saigon. The Partnership asked me, as co-director of the Center for Sexuality, Gender, and Religion at Claremont School of Theology, to write a letter affirming participation and encouraging the parade committee to reconsider. In consultation with colleagues, I drafted a letter of support signed by the center's co-directors (Bidwell, Kao, & Mandolfo, 2013). Three weeks later, I published an op-ed column on the conflict, linking anti-queer violence in racial-ethnic communities to religious language about sacrifice (Bidwell, 2013). The letter of support, I thought, could advocate and influence; the op-ed column could comfort and teach.

Two concerns fueled my response. First, the Tet parade is arguably the diaspora community's most visible and important occasion, a celebration of Vietnamese culture and community. Yet "culture" and "community"—the question of who and what are "Vietnamese"—are changing constructs. Queer Viets had been erased from a significant cultural moment, reduced to a singular identity based on sexuality or gender without reference to heritage, culture, race, or religion, and shamed by religious leaders who expected sacrifice to maintain harmony. I wanted to offer them a pastoral word. Second, the bishop's call for "sacrifice" made me angry. It was, I thought, more problematic than the vote to exclude queer Viets. It demanded a prophetic theological response.

Yet what can a white Presbyterian pastor and Buddhist practitioner from the progressive theological academy say with credibility about anything, let alone queer rights, to politically and socially conservative religious leaders in the Vietnamese diaspora community? I have a long association with the Vietnamese-American community, but I will never be an insider. I do not speak Vietnamese and therefore cannot fully understand or grasp nuances in community debate. I do not and cannot fully appreciate what is at stake for various parties facing political and social issues in Little Saigon, and I do not and cannot fully appreciate the potential (negative and positive) consequences of choosing to speak publicly to those issues as a pastor-scholar-clinician from the dominant culture and a privileged religious community. Yet members of the community solicited my perspective.

LEARNING FROM THE COMMUNAL-CONTEXTUAL AND INTERCULTURAL PARADIGMS

To navigate the conflict's religious, cultural, political, generational, and racial-ethnic contexts, I turned to the communal-contextual and intercultural paradigms of pastoral theology. I also relied on Vietnamese-American and Taiwanese-American colleagues to vet my language in hope of avoiding an overt, unintentional, or just plain ignorant cultural mistake.

The communal-contextual paradigm (Patton, 1993) attends to the situatedness of care. It parses the ways that community and contextual systems influence human

experience and contribute to (and alleviate) suffering. The intercultural paradigm (Lartey, 2003, 2006) likewise embraces contextuality; it also gives equal attention to multiplicity and authentic practice as sources of theological insight, asking pastoral theologians to attend to “the complex nature of the interaction between people who have been influenced by different cultures, social contexts and origins, and who themselves are often enigmatic composites of various strands of ethnicity, race, geography, culture, and socio-economic setting” (Lartey, 2003, p. 13).

I found these approaches useful for reflection on the Little Saigon controversy. They enriched my grasp of the situation, and they helped mitigate my social and religious privilege.⁵ Providing a full exegesis of the (inter)cultural and contextual factors shaping Little Saigon is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper. However, an overview of three issues—immigration, sociopolitical dynamics, and religion—might help illustrate the complexity of discerning a public pastoral theological response to the parade controversy.

(AT LEAST) THREE IMMIGRATION EXPERIENCES

Vietnamese-Americans have different immigration experiences. Generally speaking, the Vietnamese diaspora to the United States occurred in three broad waves. The first, consisting mostly of elite, educated South Vietnamese associated with the military, the government, and their U.S. “advisors”, begin to arrive in Orange County in 1975. They received political amnesty from the U.S. government and tended to be politically active, politically and socially conservative, and committed to maintaining a Vietnamese identity. They proclaim whole-hearted allegiance to the United States, but some express ambivalence about living here; it is the country that betrayed, abandoned, and yet rescued them. The second wave of immigrants, colloquially (and derogatorily) known as “boat people”, began arriving in the early to mid-1980s. They are primarily economic refugees fleeing hunger and oppression, and they arrived in Orange County after days and weeks on the open sea, terrorized by pirates, followed by months or years in refugee camps. Second-wave immigrants arrived with less education and fewer material and social resources for establishing themselves in the United States, and their primary goals were survival and assimilation. A third wave arrived as part of the Orderly Departure Program from the late 1980s through to the 1990s. Sponsored by family members already established in the United States, these arrivals were welcomed into sizeable Vietnamese-American communities with growing social, political, and economic influence.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL REALITIES

Immigration patterns shaped the controversy in Little Saigon. The parade committee included first-wave immigrants born in Vietnam; Viet Rainbow (as the queer contingent came to be known) involved primarily second- and third-generation Vietnamese-Americans with family roots in the first, second, and third waves of immigration. Nonetheless, they have shared experiences. All residents of Little

Saigon are shaped by forced immigration, political oppression and violence, war trauma, exile, historical and contemporary colonization, racism, classism, and other dynamics. Some Vietnamese–American families and organizations promote patriarchal and heteronormative values as a part of maintaining culture, and sexuality is rarely discussed in the open. In addition, the anomie, violence, crime, gang presence, intergenerational tension, trauma, and identity conflicts present in the Vietnamese communities of Orange County and elsewhere have been well documented in the literature and film of the Vietnamese diaspora (Dinh, 2010; Kupersmith, 2014; Lam, 2005, 2010, 2013; Le, 2008; Nguyen, 2009; Nguyen, 2010, 2012; Pham, 2009; Phan, 2004).

I share none of these experiences, but I have been entrusted with stories by many Vietnamese refugees and Vietnamese–Americans. I have made an effort to understand the community and its experiences: For more than a decade I have attended Vietnamese Heritage Camp each summer with my family; I have visited Vietnam twice, where our son was born; for five years I was part of a Vietnamese Buddhist community in Texas; and with my wife, sponsored a Vietnamese refugee who was granted amnesty for religious reasons by the United States. My primary Buddhist teachers are exiled Vietnamese monks; with them I have visited Vietnamese diaspora communities in Taiwan and the United States.

RELIGION AND CULTURE

It is difficult to separate culture and religion in Vietnam and in Little Saigon.⁶ The community is strongly influenced by Confucian norms: filial piety, respect for elders, collective identity, moral expectations, and a shame–honor dynamic that interacts with beliefs informed by animism, Buddhism, Christianity, Cao Dai, Islam, and Taoism. Many Vietnamese are religiously multiple; I know people in Little Saigon and elsewhere who maintain home altars to Taoist gods, venerate ancestors, make offerings at Buddhist temples, and receive Eucharist at Catholic Mass—sometimes all on the same day. This touches my own complex religious bonds as someone nurtured by both Theravada Buddhism and Reformed Christianity.

MAKING A PUBLIC PASTORAL THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE

In light of these realities, I wanted the letter of support to express respect for Little Saigon's first generation, honoring its leadership and wisdom and avoiding shame and loss of face. It was also important to acknowledge the value of maintaining continuity with historic cultural values. To achieve these goals, I highlighted Tet's focus on family, noting that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are a part of Vietnamese–American families who worship in and provide leadership to Little Saigon religious communities. The letter said, in part:

As a whole, Vietnamese Americans understand the pain of exclusion and living 'in between' cultures. The ability to live with this ambiguity is a gift of courage—a gift that Vietnamese Americans offer to the nation as a whole. Perhaps one of the

community's challenges is living with that ambiguity in ways that honor emerging experiences and voices without imposing restrictions similar to those that have hurt Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans in the past? (Bidwell, Kao, & Mandolfo, 2013)

The op-ed column, intended as an act of care and advocacy for queer Viets, took a more polemic tone. I focused on the bishop's call to sacrifice, violence against queer people in racial-ethnic communities, and the parade committee's suggestion that queer Viets hold a separate event. I wrote, in part:

Legitimate sacrifice in Little Saigon would involve privileged people making a compromise, an accommodation, for the sake of a greater good. The bishop in Little Saigon offered the GLBT community a perverted—dare I say sinful—understanding of sacrifice.

The ruse of a separate parade diverts attention from an injustice. It masks the power of religious rhetoric and its implicit, probably unintended, appeal to violence.

Separate is never equal. That's why they want it to be separate. (Bidwell, 2013)

I used the priorities and wisdom of the communal-contextual and intercultural paradigms to make (what I hope was) an effective and careful response to the Tet parade controversy. On reflection, it was good-enough public pastoral theology. Yet the experience caused me to imagine a different paradigm for pastoral theology to complement the communal-contextual and intercultural approaches while engaging religious diversity and religious multiplicity⁷ (Greider, 2011) in a different way.

COMPLEMENTING THE COMMUNAL-CONTEXTUAL AND INTERCULTURAL PARADIGMS

The communal-contextual and intercultural paradigms helped me respond to the Tet controversy, but they did not provide tools to engage sufficiently with the theological dimensions of the planning committee's argument or the bishop's call for sacrifice. In retrospect, my response—as public pastoral theology in the context of religious diversity—ought to have reflected a richer understanding of “sacrifice” in its Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist contexts. This would have meant responding from an inter-religious, rather than solely Christian, perspective. It would have entailed studying sacred texts; exploring the teachings and commentaries that surround and evolve from those texts; and engaging intertextual and inter-religious conceptions of sacrifice from Vietnamese and other Asian perspectives. It would have meant offering various interpretations of the bishop's statement to highlight the multiple voices within Christian, Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist traditions. By placing sacrifice in an inter-religious perspective, I could have interrogated and nuanced the Christian traditions, complexified my own understanding, and deconstructed the cultural and religious assumptions and privileges that I brought to the situation. Engaging the bishop's statement more fully as religious and theological thought might have led me to a more respectful, charitable, and compassionate stance towards the idea of sacrifice for the good of the community. I might have

engaged him less polemically, pointing toward the contexts and complexity of his authority. I could have invited him to recognize and account for his positionality and multiplicity as a Christian leader influenced by Confucian norms. I could have done these things and still held the bishop responsible for his use of power and privilege. I might even have come to value and support his stance in its contextual and religious setting.

None of this would have been easy. I am not a scholar of Confucianism, do not read classical Chinese or contemporary Vietnamese, have not studied Taoist philosophy, and know nothing about Mahayana Buddhist thought on sacrifice. In relation to the controversy over the Tet parade, I am effectively mono-religious and therefore unlikely to see, engage, or appreciate the religious complexities of the conversation, the ways in which those complexities intertwine with culture, or how race, ethnicity, politics, and social class inform and nuance the spiritual and religious rhetoric. How, then, can I speak responsibly about the religious and spiritual aspects of the situation, especially given how common religious multiplicity has been in this community? If the bishop is religiously multiple to some degree—formally Lutheran, culturally Confucian, and ideologically capitalist—is it fair for me to critique his words from the perspective of a single tradition? I do not think so.

From my perspective, effective public pastoral theology in multi- and inter-religious contexts will engage the richness of, be accountable to, and practice mutuality among myriad religious traditions. Treating religious diversity as a type of intersectionality (Ramsay, 2014) can be useful for pastoral theologians; doing so asks us to direct “careful attention to how power as privilege or domination insinuates itself at the societal level through ideological, political, and economic domains and their related institutions,” both subjectively and socially (p. 458). But religious diversity is more than intersectionality; it includes living, historical traditions that are larger than social identity categories. To engage it in this way, public pastoral theology will develop a methodological approach and scholarly tools that facilitate deep spiritual learning and transformed understanding across religious borders—“a reflective and contemplative endeavor by which we see the other [religious/spiritual tradition] in light of our own, and our own in light of the other” (Clooney, 2010, loc. 333). This is not inter-religious dialogue.

I think public pastoral theology in post-Christian contexts will, at its best, engage other traditions not as social contexts or systems of power, but as equal sources of spiritual, religious, and theological wisdom. Their resources, practices, and epistemologies call Christians to transform their understandings of human beings, creation, care, and God. We will not be satisfied with propositional and doctrinal understandings of other religions and spiritualities; we will also engage their practices of care and their caring resources. We seek to see our own caring practices and resources from Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Taoist, Jewish, and other religious perspectives. These types of deep learning and transformation are not the goals of intercultural and communal-contextual approaches to pastoral theology. These paradigms serve other purposes.

For these reasons, I am increasingly convinced that a comparative theological paradigm for pastoral theology—a “caring across traditions” that attends to and engages theological constructs in other religious traditions as authoritative voices—could complement the communal-contextual and intercultural paradigms. Developing a comparative theological approach would lead, I think, to richer public pastoral theology in contexts of religious difference.

ENVISIONING A COMPARATIVE THEOLOGICAL PARADIGM

A comparative theological paradigm places the evolving discipline of comparative theology into dialogue with the norms, criteria, and practices of pastoral theology. Tracing the background and development of comparative theology is a useful exercise, but is beyond the scope of this paper; comparative theology has roots in the seventeenth century (Clooney, 2010) and today is understood as “the work of learning about ultimate reality by drawing from the resources of more than one religious tradition” (J. Thatamanil, personal communication, May 17, 2015). Comparative theology is not comparative religion; it assumes a religious commitment on the part of the scholar, who sets out to explore parallel claims in other religious traditions (Comparative Theology Group, n.d.). Comparative theologians emphasize difference as much as (if not more than) similarities. They focus on the practice of comparison rather than on theoretical constructs, and their work tends to have strongly autobiographical dimensions, motivated by and directed towards a constructive theological purpose, “even if that purpose is a relatively modest aspiration to see one’s own tradition anew in light of an encounter with another tradition” (J. Thatamanil, personal communication, May 17, 2015). Francis Clooney (2010, p. 9) describes comparative theology as “being intelligently faithful to tradition even while seeking fresh understanding outside that tradition.” I understand comparative theology as a Christian theological practice that acknowledges the theological authority of other religious traditions and engages them as partners in the work of theological construction.

This approach is not alien to pastoral theology; for more than a decade, pastoral theologians have turned to non-Christian religious traditions in order to better understand and provide faithful, skillful, and contextually appropriate care. For example, one of my early publications was written in a (naïve and unskilled) comparative vein (Bidwell, 2002), and I make practical pastoral theological contributions to the discipline of Buddhist–Christian studies (Bidwell, 2008, 2015a, 2015b). Emmanuel Lartey (2013) engages African traditional religions; Insook Lee engages Zen Buddhism (2011) and Confucianism (2015); Hee-Kyu Heidi Park (2015) engages Confucianism; and Siroj Sorajjakool (2001, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011) engages Taoism and Theravada Buddhism. The scholarship of Michael Koppel (2013) and Carrie Doehring (2015) suggest Buddhist influences. These existing works offer important contributions to pastoral theology and spiritual care. Future efforts along these lines would benefit from engagement with the practices, methods, norms, and concerns of comparative theology. In fact, both pastoral theologians and comparative theologians would benefit from shared conversation, cross-pollination, and collaboration.

As pastoral theologians develop a more formal comparative theological paradigm, two tasks seem necessary: first, we need to identify norms and criteria for comparative pastoral theological work; second, we need resources for research, teaching, and practice. In closing, I suggest three normative stances (which overlap to some degree) and three possible practices for a comparative theological paradigm for pastoral theology. I offer these tentatively as a possible way to begin (a) building on existing work, and (b) framing and developing resources for the future. Future work will need to assess the scope and limitations of these norms and practices.

POTENTIAL NORMS FOR A COMPARATIVE THEOLOGICAL PARADIGM

A primary norm, for me, is the bounded, malleable, and partial nature of Christian approaches to care. When Christian understandings are informed or transformed by insights from other religious traditions, they are more humble, appropriate, effective, and useful for public theology. A comparative theological paradigm situates Christian perspectives on care, health, wholeness, and other issues within a broader context: parallel claims by other religions and by the experiences of religiously multiple people. As comparative pastoral theologians, we cease to assume that Christian language, priorities, and interests are natural starting points or ways of making sense of the world. (For example, “salvation” is not a useful place to begin conversations with Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and others; that is our issue, not theirs.) Public pastoral theology in this vein does not assume Christian privilege in culture or audience, and it does not impose Christian privilege through images and metaphors. Rather, comparative pastoral theologians intentionally disrupt Christian privilege and Christian normativity to seek clearer understandings of Christ. We do not speak for or on behalf of other religious and spiritual traditions. We engage and share what we learn, and we acknowledge our sources while being mindful of the risk of colonizing, domesticating, baptizing, or appropriating them (as assessed by people from those traditions). In the words of Clooney (2010), we avoid the “persistent colonialist tendency to coopt our others, consuming them simply for our own purposes” (loc. 4048).

A second norm is the ubiquity of religious multiplicity (including multiple religious belonging, dual practice, hyphenated religious identities, complex religious identities, and complex religious bonds). Religious singularity is an important spiritual, cultural, and historical phenomenon; we cannot ignore it, but we should not privilege it. Religious and spiritual traditions have permeable boundaries. They are dynamic. Spirituality, as lived experience, is always in motion, seldom constrained by the “essentials” of a particular tradition or limited by orthodoxy. Effective public pastoral theology acknowledges, affirms, and responds to this human experience rather than assessing the doctrinal and institutional possibility, legitimacy, or cohesiveness of religious multiplicity.

A final norm is informed by the others. Mutual respect—a dialogical, I-thou relationship (Buber, 2010) with non-Christian traditions—is foundational to comparative pastoral theology. Comparative pastoral theologians approach religious diversity and religious multiplicity as gifts and resources for care, not conundrums to be solved or paradoxes to be reconciled. This stance differs from the historical orientation of systematic theologians and missiologists, who considered religious diversity something to be explained in service to mission, evangelism, and apologetics. In response, they proposed theologies of religion: Christian accounts of religious diversity. These theologies—summarized in the familiar exclusivist-inclusivist-pluralist trope—understand and assess spiritual and religious traditions in light of Christian norms and criteria, as a part of (the Christian) God's economy. In contrast, comparative pastoral theology privileges engagement over apologetics. It refuses to examine other traditions through doctrinal categories determined by Christian traditions. It does not focus on a tradition's cognitive content or

congruence with gospel, but on its authoritative insights and resources as historic, contemporary, and lived religion. To engage non-Christian traditions (and religious multiplicity) in this way is, as Katherine Rand (personal communication, April 8, 2015) notes, an act of care. It honors identity and difference. It communicates solidarity.

SUGGESTED PRACTICES FOR A COMPARATIVE THEOLOGICAL PARADIGM

Within a comparative theological paradigm, one immediate practice could lead to more effective public pastoral theology: complicating our analysis of intersecting privileges and oppressions by considering religion and spirituality alongside and within race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, immigration status, and other social identity categories. When we increase sensitivity to religion and spirituality as aspects of intersectionality, we transform our understandings of what it means to care, theorize, and make public theological responses in contexts of religious and spiritual diversity. A weakness of my analysis of the Little Saigon conflict was a failure to consider the cultural and political dimensions of the religious identities and traditions shaping the conversation.

A second practice for comparative pastoral theology—perhaps more challenging than the first—is to collaborate with scholars of other religious traditions. This could be as simple as consulting them before making a public pastoral theological response; it could be as complex as engaging in collaborative research on an ongoing basis. In retrospect, collaboration would have strengthened my analysis of Little Saigon. It also would have been simple to accomplish: I am personal friends with a Chinese–American Buddhist scholar of classical Chinese Buddhist texts (who is also a monastic) and a Japanese–American Buddhist scholar of Buddhism and popular culture. I am embarrassed that I did not think to ask for insights from their disciplines. This seems naïve, at best, if not unintentionally disrespectful or arrogant.

Finally, and I think most challengingly, pastoral theologians who value a comparative theological paradigm can add a second religious tradition to their repertoire. Most of us claim two Christian theologians (or theological traditions) and a cognate discipline as resources for our scholarly work and pastoral practice; a committed comparative pastoral theologian would develop additional expertise in a secondary religious tradition. In my case, I would develop greater expertise in Theravada Buddhism to complement my understanding of Reformed Christianity and liberation theologies. Perhaps I would especially become a student of the Thai *sangha*'s radical contemporary reformer (and comparative theologian) Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. I do not think it is realistic or necessary for comparative pastoral theologians to become expert scholars of a second tradition, but they do need to learn it in detail—not only through experiential practice, but also through close study of texts, histories, technical terms, major thinkers, and living traditions. Doing so with integrity requires us to be in close conversation with religious scholars who are part of the tradition we are learning. This is the work of a lifetime, and not everyone will (or should) be called or inspired to engage in it.

QUEER INCLUSION AND CULTURAL SHIFTS IN LITTLE SAIGON

My intention here is to suggest the utility of a comparative theological paradigm for pastoral theology, but it would be unfair to conclude without also discussing how Little Saigon resolved its struggle with Tet and sexual diversity. After eleven months of steady work, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Viets are once again part of the parade. Whether public pastoral theology influenced this development, I cannot say. I do think diversity *within* Little Saigon's different religious traditions shaped the outcome. The lived religion of Little Saigon's faith communities may be less conserving than the doctrinal stances of their leaders, a reality that became apparent when the community was asked to make a shared decision about inclusion.

In February 2013, more than 250 queer Viets and allies stood on the sidelines of the parade to advocate for full inclusion (Viet Rainbow of Orange County, n.d.). Many in the crowd welcomed them, a high-school marching band performed in their honor, and queer Viets were clearly visible at the event (Do, 2013b). In the weeks after the parade, queer leaders began to work with the city council, the mayor, city staff, and attorneys to ensure full participation in the future. This resulted in a new, non-profit educational and advocacy group, Viet Rainbow of Orange County.

Weeks before Viet Rainbow applied for the 2014 parade, however, sponsors voted pre-emptively to reject the group. A month later, the Westminster City Council asked parade sponsors to work with Viet Rainbow to identify a compromise. The groups decided to put the issue to a vote in the broader community.

As a result, in January 2014, an assembly of politicians, business leaders, college students, military veterans, and others voted 51–36 (with 10 abstentions) to include Viet Rainbow in the Little Saigon parade (Do, 2014). In response, sponsors issued a new code of conduct that limited the visibility of the queer contingent, disallowing rainbow flags, banners, drag performances, and other forms of “political campaign which may cause controversy in the community” (Murray, 2014). But Viet Rainbow participated without incident in 2014 and 2015.

In a watershed moment, a group of younger Vietnamese-Americans officially took responsibility for the parade this year. “It's a big thing,” 30-year-old Khang Bao told Southern California Public Radio, “because the first generation has been the one that organized the event” (Aguilar, 2015). Viet Rainbow's future participation is not in question.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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NOTES

- 1 I use the term “queer” in its political and theological sense as an inclusive and liberative term for people who live and love across sexual and gender categories.
- 2 Despite the planning committee's assertion, about 3 percent of Vietnamese nationals identify as homosexual (Tuoi Tre News, *Vietnam removes ban on same sex marriage*). The country's first Gay Pride event was held in 2012 in the capitol, Hanoi, with subsequent Pride events taking place in 17 cities and provinces (Viet Pride, n.d.). Marriage equality also entered public debate in Vietnam in 2012, and in 2013, the government stopped imposing fines for same-sex weddings. In 2014, it abolished the ban on—but did not legalize—same-sex marriage, a move that went into effect on January 1, 2015 (Tuoi Tre News, *Vietnam removes ban on same sex marriage*). In 2015, the country's first chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays was established in Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City (Minh, 2015).
- 3 I use “theology” and “theological” as placeholders for various practices of “thinking about the Ultimate” (a phrase I have adapted from Hintersteiner, 2012) across religious and spiritual traditions.
- 4 To this end, I suggest Jesus's teaching about the kin-dom or common/wealth (Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion*) of God as a norm and criterion for public pastoral theology.
- 5 Complex intersections of privilege and marginalization are at work in the community controversy and in my responses. While Christian privilege certainly shaped my stance, so did gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and a host of other social identities. Unfortunately, full analysis of this intersectionality remains beyond the scope of the paper.
- 6 I searched for but did not find public, religious voices from the Vietnamese–American community (and other contexts) that spoke to the Tet parade controversy. It is possible that this literature exists in Vietnamese and other languages, but my mono-linguistic limitation prevents me from accessing it.
- 7 Religious multiplicity is an umbrella term for the experience of being formed by—or having bonds to—more than one religious tradition at the same time. I use the term to encompass particular types of religious multiplicity, including multiple religious belonging, dual practice, and religious hybridity.

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