

Reflections On Trinidad: Towards A Rainbow Theology  
by Jeannie Choy Tate

Trinidad, with its colorful diversity of flowers (700 varieties of orchids), birds (400 different species) and cultures, is often referred to as the Rainbow Nation. Racially, the islands are slightly over forty percent East Indian and slightly under forty percent African descent. The remainder of the population is of European or Chinese descent, with eighteen percent of the population racially mixed. Religiously, Catholics make up the largest group with slightly over twenty five percent. Hindus comprise slightly less than twenty five percent, followed by eleven percent Anglican, six percent Muslim, and 3.4 percent Presbyterian. Looking closely at these statistics, it may be obvious that religious affiliation follows racial lines, with the majority of East Indians primarily Hindu or Muslim, and those of African descent primarily Catholic. The two political parties split along similar racial lines. What is perhaps the surprise, at least to those of us as North Americans who are unaware, is that ninety percent of the Presbyterians are East Indian.

A striking feature of the Presbyterian Church in Trinidad is its comfortable relationship with both its Presbyterian and Hindu roots. To a North American struggling with issues of living as a Christian in a pluralistic society, “Trini” Presbyterians offer an intriguing witness. Hinduism with its colorful religious practice and panoply of gods, including the devouring Kali, has often seemed to me the most difficult religion for Protestant Christians with their staid Reformed worship and purist monotheism to understand. (The possible exception to this is Diana Eck’s book, *From Bozeman to Benares*.) Here in Trinidad, however, I experienced the gift of a lived relationship between these two world religions, a relationship characterized not so much by blending—which would imply that both had lost their unique identities—as by a relationship where both are changed through interaction with one another while the essence of each religious heritage remains intact and true to its own identity. Thus, Trinidad may well present an opportunity to view our own pluralistic future, both its vision and its issues.

It was within this incredible diversity that CANAAC (Caribbean and North America Area Council) held its October 2002 meeting. CANAAC is an organization of both large and small Reformed denominations from the Caribbean, United States, and Canada that meets every eighteen months. A regional branch of the larger World Alliance of Reformed Churches, CANAAC meets to create dialogue around issues of theological and social reform concerns to member nations. CANAAC members in the United States include the Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ, Reformed Church in America, Cumberland Presbyterian Church, Christian Reformed Church, Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Hungarian and Lithuanian Reformed Churches, and Korean Presbyterians along with their Presbyterian and United Church counterparts in Canada, Guyana, Grenada, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, and Cuba.

We had our first hint of Trinidad’s unique multicultural, multiracial, and multi-religious history while on a tour of its capital of Port-of-Spain. When Trinidad, which lies off the coast of Venezuela, was “discovered” by Columbus on his third voyage, it was inhabited by aboriginal tribes whose numbers were soon decimated by white men’s diseases and ill-treatment. Spain never really colonized the island but instead encouraged Catholic French from other Caribbean

islands to come with their African slaves and establish cocoa and sugar plantations. In 1797, however, Trinidad was captured by the British who ruled it until 1962. When slavery in British colonies was abolished in 1834 and freed men and women of African descent moved off the plantations, a new source of cheap labor was needed. After an attempt to import Chinese was aborted because many of them did not survive, East Indians were brought over in large numbers as indentured laborers, taking their place on the lowest rung of the social ladder.

Our guide told us this history had been passed to him from his Hindu grandfather who, at 103, was one of those who came from India to work the sugar cane. When our guide's father converted to Christianity, however, he was disowned. While there remains no relationship between the grandfather and his own children, the grandchildren have re-established their ties with him and take great pleasure in their cultural and religious roots.

In a few weeks, the whole nation will join together to celebrate the Hindu feast of Divali. We could already see signs of the preparation for the feast. Christians will join this celebration, as they do with other Muslim festivals (somewhat to the dismay of the more purist Muslims who feel their festivals have been co-opted). Then, of course, there is Carnivale. People of all religions are said to unite on Shrove Tuesday and separate again on Ash Wednesday. As a devout Presbyterian, our guide participates fully in these religious festivals, drawing the line only at the eating of food consecrated to other deities.

The Presbyterians came to Trinidad in 1868. Presbyterians from Canada took over a failed American mission. At that time, the East Indians were the only social group not already being proselytized, so the Canadians learned Hindi and began their work with this ethnic group. (When we first arrived in Trinidad, we stayed in Morton House, the home of the first Presbyterian missionary.) Presbyterians are noted for their intellectual and educational endeavors. The Presbyterian missionaries established schools, giving East Indians access to some of the best education on the island. An unseen consequence has been that the East Indians have now moved to the top of the socioeconomic ladder.

The Presbyterian worship service we attended was a blend of anthems in Hindi, praise songs, and traditional Euro-centric Reformed hymns. The most incredible experience was perhaps a youth accompaniment on steel drums, along with organ and piano, to some of the praise songs, adding a tone of deep yearning that left us holding our breaths. Later in the social hall, we were treated to a dinner that included curries and roti (nan) and a traditional Indian dance. Not only has the language of Hindi been retained within the church, but other cultural traditions as well. For instance, the Hindu tradition of purba is observed. It is an occasion for prayer and celebration during major life events—a new home, new job (or even looking for a job), an educational endeavor—where friends and members of the congregation gather in a person's home for prayer, dedication, and the sharing of a feast.

Those of us from North America each brought our own perspectives to the worship service. Coming from a Euro-centric worship tradition, I experienced the Hindi hymns as culturally enriching. Others from ethnic American congregations were struck by the lack of indigenous impact on the basic Reformed structure of the service. Some wondered whether the traditional East Indian cultural forms might make worship unwelcoming for those of African descent and

asked whether worship forms indigenous to Trinidad could be found that would welcome all ethnic groups. This, however, might cause the East Indian community to lose contact with their own cultural heritage. Additionally, there were Trini youth who longed for popular music and worship styles to make worship more attractive to the younger generation; however, contemporary styles are predominantly shaped by American culture, raising yet another cultural issue. Experiencing and thinking through such issues of worship and culture are part of what makes the cross-cultural sharing of CANAAC so fruitful and exciting.

Specifically, the foci of our Trinidad meeting were youth and re-visioning. Because CANAAC is intentional about developing the next generation of ecumenical leadership, a youth consultation with youth primarily from Guyana and Trinidad was held concurrent to our meeting, with opportunities for their consultation to be integrated with ours. Our second focus involved re-visioning CANAAC based on a paper by the current moderator from Jamaica, who challenges that overtones from the organization's white missionary days remain. Such overtones hamper the ability of members from dominant nations, i.e., people of privilege, to engage in honest dialogue with members of the Two Thirds World on global issues. The social reform issues are wide-ranging and include transnational corporations, sweatshops, the Cuban embargo, the deportation of gang members from the U.S. to "home" countries where they have never lived, the rights of women and gays and lesbians, even the huge debts that Caribbean nationals owe after attending North American seminaries. Though the color of WARC changed dramatically with the election of Alan Boesak as president in 1982, the vestiges of polite tea-party conversation remain and at times one can almost hear the faint tinkling of teacups in the background.

CANAAC grapples with how to bring theology and social action together in dialogue. Reformed theology has always been the strength of WARC, and CANAAC and the theology committees are well organized with a clear direction in this area. But an academic tradition that performs its function rationally by distancing itself in the Germanic Euro-centric male mode often fails to engage real life with its messy tensions and ambiguities of socioeconomic and political realities. On the other hand, social activists too often are so submersed in the messiness of lived reality, they fail to take time to surface and reflect theologically upon their experience.

This is why the integration of theology and social reform is so important and worth the grappling done by CANAAC. Another way to speak of this is to talk of closing the hermeneutical circle by putting theological interpretation into action and then reflecting theologically upon these actions. In this way, actions are changed in light of theology and theology is changed in light of actions. Or, as Dorothea Soelle puts it, "Believe, reflect, and then believe again in a new and better way." That is the cycle of theological interpretation that has the potential to move us forward in the direction of peace and justice—*real* peace and justice, not some polite tea-party version that pretends that differences do not exist.

To bring theology and social reform into deeper dialogue in the future, it is recommended that CANAAC make greater use of our host countries as a source for contextual theology and liturgy. Our host church from Trinidad was immediately responsive to this request and set up a panel to help inform us on local issues. The panel itself represented a model for the respectful dialogue about which we had been speaking. The three panelists took issue with each other's understanding of race relations in Trinidad. Two members argued that these relationships are

primarily harmonious, especially since many families are racially mixed. The third member argued that since the Presbyterian Church is primarily East Indian and, in Trinidad, partly due to Presbyterian schools, East Indians are people of privilege; therefore, the perspective of the church in Trinidad is biased and unwilling to look at racial resentments and conflict. Despite their differences, it was clear that the panelists have a deep, abiding respect for one another.

Another issue with which we dealt was how to level the playing field in dialogue so that denominations of privilege with the largest number of voting delegates do not overpower others who come in smaller numbers. It was suggested that if we speak from our suffering rather than our privilege, then all of our contributions would be of equal value. To also increase intercultural dialogue at future meetings, we are recommending longer terms for delegates and more community building, especially in smaller intercultural groups. The youth made an exciting contribution to encourage communication between meetings by setting up online dialogues for sharing and giving feedback as theology is in the process of being developed.

As the largest denomination and largest financial contributor, the PC(USA) is in an interesting position. At these meetings, we are the dominant denomination from the dominant nation, which places us in a position of privilege. Yet most of us have spent our lives feeling marginalized within our own nation and often within our own denomination. This leaves us feeling vulnerable and unwilling to acknowledge our position of privilege since we associate it with negative power. We tend to want to deny our privilege, though clearly this is how others view us. Perhaps PC(USA) delegates need to dialogue around issues of power and dominance among ourselves if we are to claim who we are and bring that position honestly to the table. That is what is so exciting about CANAAC—the possibility of having honest dialogue that builds on both the strengths and vulnerabilities of member nations. It is only a potential but it is a potential that rarely exists elsewhere in the world.