

Religion and Religions

Max Charlesworth

The 'scandal' of religious diversity

Perhaps the most striking fact about religions is that there are so many of them. This paper is an attempt to walk around the implications of this fact and to suggest how religious believers might cope with what has been called 'the scandal of religious diversity'. In this I am using some ideas discussed in my recent book *Religious Inventions* (1997).

As I have remarked, it is a brute fact that there are many diverse religious systems and that all of them, in one way or another, claim to be **true**, in some sense of that difficult word, as a body of teachings and as a way of life and as a 'revelation' or manifestation of the 'divine' or whatever term we use for the 'object' of religion. The problem is of course: how can all these religious systems and their 'revelations' be true since their truth claims very often appear to be incompatible with each other?

But the world religions - Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism etc.- do make truth claims and argue that they are the custodians of a body of divinely revealed truths, and it is not difficult to see that there are prima facie conflicts and contradictions and incommensurable differences between the truths proclaimed by the various religions.

Most religions have ways of dealing with the prima facie scandal of religious diversity. At one extreme there is the way of absolutism and exclusion: **my** religious system is absolutely and exclusively true and is the sole true way of life, and this means that all other religious systems and ways of life are false in so far as they differ from my religion. In this simple-minded view, what is seen as the present regrettable situation of religious diversity and division has come about through sin and ignorance leading people to follow 'false gods' and when that is remedied diversity will vanish and true religious unity will prevail. In other words diversity is a wholly contingent feature of religions.

At the other extreme there is the way of syncretism (although this is not a wholly apt term) which sees the different religious systems as particular, and partial, manifestations or expressions of a set of basic truths. Suitably interpreted and reduced to their essentials the various religious systems all say very much the same things or, to use the familiar metaphor, they are different paths to the same destination. This is the position of what might be called 'vulgar Hinduism' and of the syncretism of Aldous Huxley's **philosophia perennis** and certain other philosophers of religion such as Fritjof Schuon. The title of Schuon's celebrated book *The Transcendental Unity of Religions* (1984) epitomises this position: the inner meaning of all the world religions is the same even though they differ externally in the way they

conceptualise and express that meaning.

Between those two simple-minded extremes (both of which, I believe, are unacceptable) there is a spectrum of other possible positions and it is these positions that I wish to discuss here.

Awareness of religious diversity is, in a sense, as old as religion itself. The Old Testament is full of allusions to other religions - the Middle East was always the California of the ancient world - and Christianity was born into a world of competing religious systems. (It is worth remarking that the Old Testament acknowledges the holiness of many 'good pagans', for example, Enoch, Daniel, Noah, Job, Melchizedek, Lot, the Queen of Sheba (Daniélou 1957)). Again, the religions of the early Israelites was powerfully influenced by the Canaanite deities - El and his consort Asherah, Baal and his consort Anat et al. Early Israelite religion was not exclusively monotheistic and there is no doubt that there was a tolerance of other Gods (Smith 1990).

However, Justin and other early Christian 'Apologists' in the 2nd century, while holding that Christianity was a 'philosophy', also maintained that it was not merely one philosophy among others but **the** philosophy. The truths that had been "scattered and dispersed throughout Greek philosophy had been synthesised and systematised in Christian philosophy. Each Greek philosopher, they wrote, had possessed only a portion of the **logos** itself, incarnated in Jesus Christ" (Hadot 1995:128).

However, serious theological discussion of the problem of "religious pluralism" from within the religious sphere is largely a phenomenon only of this century. In the Roman Catholic Church it is in fact much more recent, with the work of the great Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner, and the establishment of the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions by the Second Vatican Council being the catalyst¹.

I do not propose to engage here in a formal philosophical discussion about the problem of religious diversity. There is now a large philosophical and theological literature about the problem - one thinks of the work of Karl Rahner, John Hick, Raimundo Pannikar, Paul Knitter, Henri Corbin and others - and an even larger corpus of 'pop' theological writing. Further, the post modernist critique of the universalism of the European enlightenment and its emphasis on 'meta-narratives', and the new focus on localism and pluralism has played a part (Knitter 1985; D'Costa 1986; Hick & Knitter 1987; Phań 1991; Küng & Moltmann 1986; Oxtoby 1983). Again, I am not concerned with those who hold that religion as a whole is an illusion and that all religions are false and there is no realm of 'the divine'. Instead, I look at the question of religious diversity from **within** the religious sphere, so to speak. In other words, the question I pose is this: "how can a Christian or a Buddhist or a Hindu, or for that matter a member of an Australian Aboriginal people, come to terms with the fact that there are other and different and incompatible religious systems in the world? What modifications in one's religious position as a Buddhist or a Christian or a Hindu has one to make in order to accommodate this fact so that

a person might say, "I am a Christian or a Hindu or a Muslim or a member of the Australian Pitjantjatjara people and I believe that the teachings of my religion are true in some sense, but at the same time I recognise and accept the fact that there are other religious systems and that other people believe that the teachings of their religion are true?"

The Ecumenical Movement

One can get some preliminary enlightenment here by reflecting on what has happened in the ecumenical movement among the mainstream Christian Churches since the 1950s. In this I am following Raimundo Pannikar and others who have pointed to the analogies between the attempts to cope with the diversity among the Christian Churches and recent attempts to cope with the wider problem of diversity among the world religions. The ecumenical movement has had a long and chequered history and of course many fundamentalist Christian sects still reject its whole *raison d'être*. However, a number of lessons have emerged from the ecumenical discussions so far.

First, the goal of unity among the Christian Churches is not strict or exclusive unity in the sense of theological and ecclesiological and ritual uniformity. It is admitted that there have been, and will continue to be, wide differences in how the credal essentials of Christianity are interpreted and practiced in the various Christian traditions, though the definition of what is essential and what differences are tolerable is a matter for contention.

Second, there now seems to be general agreement that the central theological and ecclesiological values of the various Christian traditions must, within certain limits, not just be tolerated but be recognised in a positive way and respected as genuine, quasi-autonomous 'developments' within Christianity. This kind of recognition and respect has always been there as between the Western (or 'Latin') Church and the Eastern Churches with their very different theological cultures, forms of spirituality and Church structures, and it has now to some extent been extended to most other mainstream Christian traditions. The implication of this that no one Christian Church can claim to be the sole repository of Christian truth, although it may claim that it is a paradigmatic form of Christianity which, so to speak, sets the standard or bench-mark for 'orthodoxy'.

Third, an implication of the ecumenical discussions between the Christian Churches is that genuine doctrinal and ecclesiological developments, in Newman's sense of that term, even of a radical kind, are possible in the future. The so-called 'deposit of faith' is not fixed and static (as the various forms of fundamentalism claim) but dynamic and open to change in the sense that virtualities and possibilities in the original 'revelation' are continually being disclosed. As Derrida and others have reminded us, the meaning of a text can never be circumscribed or defined exhaustively, and one can say the same of the meaning of the original Christian revelation. In a particular age or historical/cultural context certain implicit

possibilities or virtualities in the original revelation may be brought out or 'developed' in a way that would not have been possible in other ages or contexts. Take, for example, the contemporary emphasis upon the social justice dimension of the Gospel with its concomitants in the movement of 'liberation theology' and the idea that the Church must be (in Hans Küng's description) 'the dwelling place of freedom'. Or again, one may consider the recognition of women's authority in the Church as a similar development. The concept of 'tradition' is clearly important here.

In parenthesis, it is because they are genuine developments, that is, making explicit what was implicit in the original revelation, though this is usually recognised in hindsight, that it is misguided to look for explicit intimations of the 'social Gospel', or liberation theology, or women's ecclesial authority in the literal text of the Gospels, or in the concrete details of the life of Jesus, or in the history of the early Christian Church. There are, of course, large problems with the idea of doctrinal and religious development and how authentic developments are to be distinguished from false developments. Many Christians, for example, see the ordination of women priests as a valid development but many others contest this.

At a more radical level, there is a sense in which all the elements of a religion are the product of human invention, a process of creative reception and interpretation and concretisation of an original 'revelation' of the Divine. A contemporary Christian theologian has said: Jesus did not found Christianity "it was founded by Jesus earliest followers on the foundation of his transformation of Judaism" (Sykes 1984:20). Those early followers were in turn powerfully influenced by the interaction, at the end of classical antiquity, between very different systems of thought and theological-philosophical 'discourses', Jewish, Greek, Roman and so on. In this interaction, new meanings appeared and new possibilities of evolution of the original revelation were disclosed.

Ecumenical discussions have emphasised that the original Christian revelation is, as has already been noted, historically and culturally mediated. We know, for example, that the present systems of Church organisation and government have all developed historically and in a culturally contingent way so that it is quite possible to envisage other, and radically different, forms or structures of organisation. Even those Christian churches which emphasise their continuity with 'the Church of the Apostles' recognise this. In addition, it is recognised that any particular historical/cultural form or structure of Christianity must obey the law of all such cultural structures, namely that certain benefits are always purchased at a certain cost. There are no 'perfect' structures where the benefits are unalloyed and unrestricted.

At the present time then the position of a Christian belonging to one of the mainline Churches has changed quite radically from what it typically was fifty years ago. The Christian believer now has to say, "I am a Roman Catholic or an Anglican or member of the Greek Orthodox Church or of the Reformed Churches because I believe that my Church expresses the values of the Gospel in a paradigmatic or pure way. However, I acknowledge that other Christian Churches (within certain limits)

have developed the values of the Gospel in their own very different ways in their liturgy, spirituality, prayer, sacraments, theological reflection, Church organisation and government, social concern etc., and I recognise and accept this. **In this sense** I acknowledge that I can no longer claim that my Church is the sole 'true' Church, although I still wish to claim some kind of special status for my Church and its teaching".

From this point of view, ecumenical dialogue between the Christian Churches becomes not just an option but a necessity. To put this in another way, there has been a gradual recognition that the diversity between the Christian Churches should not be seen as some kind of regrettable 'fall' from a primordial unity of belief - the result of human willfulness and ignorance - but as a phenomenon having a positive meaning in itself.

I am sure that the various Church officials engaged in ecumenical discussion would not subscribe to all the implications of Christian ecumenism I have been trying to tease out here. Again, for the moment I leave aside the question whether, philosophically speaking, the position I have been describing is a coherent one. I believe that it is coherent and that there are certain (limping) analogies with the view of science that has emerged from contemporary philosophy of science (for example, that historically there have been competing models or paradigms in science and that these models are relatively 'incommensurable').

However, I believe that we can use the insights gained through the ecumenical movement to confront the problems raised by the diversity of world religions. The problems are, of course, very different since the diversity between the traditions **within** a religious system (within Christianity, for example) is different from the diversity **between** religious systems (between Christianity and Buddhism, for example). The latter is of course a much more radical form of diversity.

What is the deep meaning of religious diversity?

As I remarked before, any religious believer has to acknowledge and come to terms with, and have some kind of theory about, the brute fact that there are many diverse religious systems with prima facie incompatible forms of religious belief and practice. What, for a religious believer, is the meaning of this diversity? Is it to be seen as just as an unfortunate accident, or something that has come about through sin and hubris and ignorance (compare the myth of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9))², or as an illusion, or does it have some deeper purpose to it? To put it naively, if there is a God what does God mean by it? What divine purpose, if any, does this variety and diversity serve? Is it something positively willed by God as part of a grand plan, or is it a consequence of what Christians call the 'Fall'? What are we to think, if we are Christians, of the fact that Christianity appeared as an historical phenomenon some 50,000 years after (so far as we know) the beginnings of Australian Aboriginal religion, for example? How are we to explain the religious interregnum between (to put it in a simple-minded way) the Creation and the manifestation of

Jesus Christ? Again, if religion is a human phenomenon and comes into being, so to speak, with the appearance of human beings in the universe and has relevance only so long as human beings are about, can we speak of 'pre-religious' and 'post religious' eras? I have been posing these questions from a Christian point of view, but of course these same questions can be posed, and have to be posed, in the terms of the other world religions.

The early Christians thought that the religion of the New Testament simply complemented and 'fulfilled' the religion of the Old Testament as though the latter came into being at the moment of creation. But, as we know, Judaism came into being at a particular historical moment, much later than Hinduism and Buddhism and Taoism, and much later still than some of the so-called 'primal' religions such as Australian Aboriginal religions. If, to use the language of Western medieval theology, God desires or wills that all human beings should be 'saved', how was God's 'salvific will' manifested, and how were his purposes 'revealed', and what religious 'way' was available to humankind before Judaism and Christianity came on the scene? (The theological doctrine that everyone should be offered the means of salvation is a crucial one in this discussion, but it is difficult to analyse it since it seems to run counter to the idea of predestination that is so marked in a number of religions. Again, it seems to be at odds with dualistic forms of religion (Zoroastrianism and Manicheism etc.) where we cannot assume that the good principle will always prevail over the evil principle and that the divine principle will always ensure that everyone is always offered the possibility of being saved.

Even the most convinced and devout Jewish or Christian believer, who sees the Old Testament and/or the New Testament as 'God's own' revelation, has to ponder on what God was doing, so to speak, during the long historical gap or interregnum between the beginnings of humankind and the appearance of the 'chosen people', and later Jesus Christ's 'fulfillment' of the Old Testament. That period, when presumably 'primal religions' such as Australian Aboriginal religions flourished, must have had a positive meaning in God's plan; it cannot, for the believer at any rate, just have been a long period of divine silence and indifference. Any religious believer needs to have, one might say, some kind of theory about it.

One would have to say, however, that so far the problem of religious diversity has been largely a Christian preoccupation. Certainly in some forms of Hinduism and Buddhism quasi-syncretistic solutions have been proposed (all religions fundamentally express the same truths) but that is in effect, as I shall argue in a moment, to deny that there is genuine religious diversity and that there is a problem about it.

It has been suggested that the reason why Christians have been so concerned about religious diversity is (a) because of Christian guilt over past religious exclusivism and 'imperialism', (b) because of Western liberal ideas about the value of autonomy and (c) because of recent Western ideas about the 'relativism' of culture and of human knowledge. As it has been put: "Pluralism, with its view that every

religion has its own particular integrity, is a product of modern Western rationalisation. Pluralists are modernists who think that autonomy is the highest good” (Driver 1987). However, it could also be said, more positively, that Christian theologians have been perhaps more self-critical about their own belief systems and more open to the radical possibilities that reflection on religious diversity discloses.

Facing up to the problem of religious diversity

Put very schematically, there are a number of ways in which we can face up to this problem. First, as we noted before, one can maintain that Christianity is exclusively the one true religion and that all the other religions are simply false: they are forms of superstition rather than authentic religions, or at best fumbling attempts to express truths which are expressed more clearly and fully within Christianity. Christ alone is ‘the way, the truth and the life’ and there cannot be other valid religious ways. Non-Christians must therefore be converted or offered the opportunity of becoming Christians and the eventual hope of Christians must be that all other religions will be absorbed in some way into Christianity. (As mentioned before, this position can be translated into their own terms by Hindus or Buddhists or Jews or Muslims).

However, this is not really an adequate answer to the problem of religious diversity since, in effect, it denies the reality of that diversity in that it makes it appear accidental and historically contingent, as though it could plausibly be held that the reason for religious diversity was simple ignorance and bad faith and that it could be remedied by more complete knowledge and good will. On theological grounds also, there are conclusive reasons for rejecting this position since it denies that God wills or desires that everyone should be ‘saved’ and that they have some available religious way of being saved. A kind of contradiction is involved in holding that God desires the salvation of all but in fact fails to provide accessible means for salvation. For example, if one held that only those who were baptised as Christians or who had received the teachings of the *Qur’an*, or who had the example of the Buddha before them, could be saved or enlightened, then all those who lived before the time of Christ or Muhammad or Buddha would be denied the opportunity of being saved or enlightened. This doctrine about God’s ‘salvific will’ i.e. God wills that all humans should be saved and therefore that all should be offered the means of being saved, is obviously a very difficult one since there are some religions where God *prima facie* ‘predestines’ some people *not* to be saved and we need to have some explanation about this.

The second position of syncretism - all the world religions have the same essential meaning, though they express that meaning in different ways - is at the other extreme. It is, so I believe, vitiated by much the same objection already made against the absolutist/exclusivist position, namely that it does not take religious diversity seriously enough in that it assumes that diversity is an accidental and contingent feature of religions attempts to delineate the esoteric ‘essence’ which

represents the 'real meaning' of the multiplicity of religious systems inevitably do reductionist violence to the various particular systems. Equally inevitably, the 'real essence' turns out to be so abstract and de-contextualised and 'thin' as to be useless for practical religious purposes. Thus, for example, H.H. The Dalai Lama, claims that the common essence of all religions is the idea that the welfare and benefit of all sentient beings should be recognised and promoted (Carbazon 1988).

The syncretist position also faces philosophical objections in that it simply assumes that the only way of removing the appearance of contradiction from the variously competing truth claims of the world religions is to suppose that they are really making essentially the same truth claims though expressed in different ways. However, this neglects the fact that we are not looking at particular de-contextualised propositions in contradiction ('There is a God'/'There is no God'; 'Jesus is the Son of God'/'Jesus is simply a prophet or an enlightened one' etc.). The meaning of any religious proposition can only be determined by reference to a particular context or system and it is not at all clear how one can compare, at least directly, religious systems and the 'truth' of one system as against another. (The situation is all the more complex in that those systems usually have philosophical theories of one kind or another bound up with them. One thinks, for example, of the pervasive influence of neo-Platonism within Christianity or of the Indian Madhyamaka philosophical ideas on certain forms of Mahayana Buddhism.)

As I noted before, one is reminded here of Thomas Kuhn's view about scientific systems and how difficult it is to compare apparently incompatible scientific propositions **across** systems and say that one is true and the other false. One is also reminded of contemporary 'post-modernist' criticisms of the de-contextualised universalism which derived from the Enlightenment, both in the sphere of knowledge and the sphere of ethics, and of attempts to revive the idea of 'tradition' and of 'local knowledge'.

Parenthesis on the unity of religious experience

The appeal to religious experience or 'mystical' experience, as distinct from religious teaching or doctrine or speculation has always appeared attractive to those who wish to find a common underlying essence in the diverse religions. Religious revelations may differ radically in their doctrinal expressions and interpretations and theological speculations, but the religious experiences that occur to believers and devotees within the various traditions show, it is claimed, a remarkable commonality or unity. Notwithstanding the immense differences in expression and interpretations between, for example the Buddha, Meister Eckhart, Rumi, and Ramakrishna, they are all, it is said, basically reporting the same kind of 'core experiences'.

Again, when philosophers of mysticism speaks of the 'core mystical experiences' it is implied that we discover them by looking inductively at the various mystical traditions and noting their core characteristics and seeing that they are

essentially the same. But in fact, when we look at the various forms of mystical experience, we have to look at them in their total context in order to see what they mean. We cannot abstract the Buddha's religious experience of 'the void' from the total theological and cultural context which gave that experience a meaning for him and for others. And we cannot abstract Eckhart's mystical experience of being 'annihilated' in God from the total context which gave his experience a meaning both for himself and for others.

In actual fact, when we look at the different modes of mystical experience in their respective contexts we do not discern a underlying common essence in them. Rather, it is the **diversity** of mystical experiences that impresses us. The *a priori* philosophical preconception that there **must** be something in common between the various forms of mystical experience causes some thinkers to neglect anything that does not fit that assumption and to gloss over the irreducible differences that exist between, say, Christian and Buddhist mysticism.

It is worthwhile emphasising this point with regard to Meister Eckhart who has been the darling of those who wish to argue that there is a unity of religious experience among the great mystics. At first sight, Eckhart's account of his religious experience - with its focus on the divine ineffability or 'nothingness' and the 'annihilation' of the individual soul in union with God, and on 'emptiness' and the 'void' and so on - can appear to be Buddhistic and non-Western. But in fact Eckhart's account of his mystical experience is an expression - albeit a highly original one - of a number of fundamental themes in Christian theology and philosophical theology from scriptural sources relating to the 'inhabitation' of the persons of the Trinity in the soul, the Plotinian neo-Platonism of the Pseudo-Dionysius with its 'negative theology', medieval Aristotelianism influenced by the great Islamic interpreter Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and even theories about the influence of the stars on human beings. One of the best commentators on Eckhart, Alain de Libera, has in fact summed up Eckhart's teaching as "a serene culmination of medieval Aristotelianism" (de Libera 1991:25)³.

We cannot then make a sharp distinction between 'religious experience' and the 'interpretation' of that experience, which assumes that religious experience is theory or interpretation independent and that religious experiences are analogous to the basic perceptual experiences of the empiricist as though we could, as it were, abstract religious experiences from their respective interpretive contexts - Jewish and Christian and Islamic theism, Buddhist a-theism, Hindu pantheism - and then see that they are all experiences of 'the unity of all beings'. But, as we have seen, it is impossible to do this. Religious experiences do not occur - and cannot occur - in a vacuum or in a decontextualised state.

Beyond absolutism and exclusivism

To return to the main positions with regard to Christianity's relationship with other world religions, the third position argues that, while Christianity is the

paradigmatic religious and spiritual 'way', other spiritual ways also have their own positive value and cannot simply be rejected as deficient or false or as forms of superstition and idolatry. By following the way provided by their own traditions, or the basic moral law available to everyone, people can be saved as 'implicit Christians' or 'Christians by desire' or 'anonymous Christians', though what is valuable in those traditions can be found in a much fuller and richer and explicit way in Christianity. Christianity is the religious and spiritual way par excellence and the value of other religious ways can only be seen by reference to Christianity. (The great scholar of comparative religion, R.C. Zaehner, has for example argued that the theocentric tendencies of the *Bhagavad Gita* can only be fully appreciated by reference to the view of God that emerges in the central tradition of Christian mysticism (Zaehner 1968)).

A similar position seems to have been adopted in classical Judaism. Thus Bernard Lewis, an eminent Near Eastern Studies scholar, says that

..while Jews claim that the truths of their faith are universal, they do not claim that they are exclusive. Judaism is for Jews and those who care to join them. But, according to a well-known Talmudic dictum, the righteousness of all peoples and faiths have their place in paradise. The rabbis relate that before the Ten Commandments given to Moses there were seven commandments revealed in the time of Noah, and these were for all humanity. Only two of them, the bans on idolatry and blasphemy, are theological: all the rest, including the prohibition of murder, robbing, cruelty etc., are no more than the basic rules of human social co-existence. Since Judaism makes no claim to exclusive truth, salvation, according to Jewish teaching, is attainable for non-Jews, provided that they practice monotheism and morality (Lewis 1996:46).

Nevertheless it is clear that in practice that the classical rabbinic authorities saw Judaism as the central form of religion by reference to which the value of other forms of religious teaching and practice could be judged.

Lewis also remarks that "from a Muslim point of view, neither Judaism nor Christianity is a false religion. Both were in origin based on authentic revelations, but both are superseded by the final and perfect revelation vouchsafed to Muhammad in the *Koran*". Lewis goes on to say that that, "the principle has always been adopted in Muslim law and usually in practice that Christians and Jews - but not atheists, polytheists or idolators - are entitled to the protection of the Muslim state" (Lewis 1996:49). Indeed, a contemporary Muslim scholar has said that "here are those...within the Islamic world who realise that the destinies of Islam and Christianity are intertwined, that God has willed both religions to exist and to be ways of salvation for millions of human beings...and that Christianity is a dispensation willed by heaven not only as a historical background to Islam but as a revelation destined to guide a sector of humanity until the second coming of its founder" (Nasr 1986:11).

However, the main Muslim position seems to be that Islam is the central religious revelation, even though certain other forms of monotheism may have some

degree of religious value of their own.

The third position represents a considerable progress over the absolutism and exclusivism of the first position but it still stops short of according a positive religious value to the other religions and of recognising that aspects of ‘the divine’ have been revealed in other religious systems, and that authentic religious values which have not been developed within Christianity or Islam, for example, have been developed in those systems. As it has been said, “what we are left with is a set of competing absolutisms, each of which claims to be privileged and, in some sense, to be judging the others”. (Barnes 1989).

Totus Deus but not totus Dei

The fourth view attempts to acknowledge that other religious systems can have a positive and autonomous value of their own and that the fact of religious diversity has a positive meaning. In this view religious diversity is no longer an accidental or contingent feature of religions: it is, in a sense, a necessary feature and has been deliberately willed by God.

It is interesting to note that Aquinas, in discussing why there is a variety and diversity of creatures, uses the following argument:

The distinctiveness and plurality of things is because the primary agent, who is God, intended them. For he brought things into existence so that his goodness might be communicated to creatures and re-enacted through them. And because one single creature was not enough for this, he produced many and diverse creatures so that what was wanting in one expression of the divine goodness might be supplied by another, for goodness, which in God is single and all together, in creatures is multiple and scattered. Hence the whole universe less incompletely shares and represents his goodness than one thing alone. (*Summa Theologiae*:1a. 47.1)

Aquinas is here speaking of the diversity of **creatures** and he does not use the same argument of the diversity of **revelations**. However, it could be so used in an analogous way.

Thus, a Christian will hold that the Christian tradition has a privileged or paradigmatic status in that it is claimed that it is in the person of Jesus Christ that God has revealed himself most fully (but not exhaustively) to us. But at the same time the Christian believer will acknowledge that other religious systems can also contain authentic revelation. As John Hick puts it, Christians can say that God is truly to be encountered in Jesus but not only in Jesus. Jesus, he says, is *totus Deus*, that is, one who is totally expressive of God, but not *totus Dei*, that is, the exhaustive expression or revelation of God (Hick & Knitter 1987).

A more qualified version of this fourth position has been put forward in a famous (or infamous) essay on Christianity and world religions written in 1961 by the great Catholic theologian Karl Rahner. Rahner emphasises that while for the Christian, Christ is the “final, unsurpassable, irreversible” historical realisation of

what God is doing in history, at the same time non-Christian religions can be “a positive means of gaining the right relationship to God and thus for the attaining of salvation - a means which is therefore positively included in God’s plan for salvation” (Rahner 1966:115-134). Thus, according to Rahner, religions such as Islam or Buddhism which in effect do not accept that Christ is the sole manifestation of God or of the divine in human history, can nevertheless be positive ways of gaining “the right relationship to God and of attaining salvation and as such be “positively included in God’s plan for salvation”. Rahner refers to believers of good will in other religions as “anonymous Christians”, an unfortunate description which has given great offence. However, as it has been pointed out: “Rahner proposed the theory of anonymous Christianity not for proclamation to outsiders but solely for Christian consumption...to convince Christians that God’s saving presence is greater than humans and the Church” (Wong 1994: 609-634)⁴. It is this latter idea which is centrally important in Rahner’s thought. (Rahner relates that he was once asked by the Japanese philosopher Nishitani, “What would you say if I were to treat you as an anonymous Zen Buddhist?” Rahner’s response was that Nishitani should in fact treat him in exactly this way.) (Rahner 1979: 219)

A similar position is taken up by Raimundo Pannikar (at least in his earlier writings) who, while maintaining the paradigmatic status of Christ, at the same time acknowledges that other world religions have their own positive value as quasi-autonomous ‘revelations’ of the divine. (Pannikar 1984) However, this is not an exclusively Christian position since in certain forms of Buddhism a similar stance is adopted. Thus in the particular tradition of Buddhism to which the Dalai Lama belongs (the dGe lugs - ‘Geluk’ - tradition founded in the 14th century) it is emphasised that Buddhism does not make exclusivist claims for its corpus of religious truth and that other religious ways have their own value. As it has been put: “.....just as the Buddha taught many teachings within Buddhism to suit those at different levels, it is appropriate for a Buddhist (and may be true) to see other religions as teachings of the compassionate Buddha for those in different circumstances and situations. But at the same time this tradition maintains that the final truth is that of Madhyamaka Buddhism as understood by the Geluk tradition” (Williams 1991:520). This tradition has a well-defined philosophical methodology which emphasises the importance of analytic rationality and rejects any kind of epistemological relativism or pluralism. In consequence: “In terms of reasoning to find the ultimate truth, if carried out correctly and without bias the Dalai Lama holds as himself and Buddhist, in common with all dGe lugs (Geluk) practitioners, that only Buddhism will be found to make final sense” (Williams 1991:520).

From one point of view this position could be seen to be an extended version of the third position looked at before, namely that while other religions may have their own quasi-autonomous value as authentic ‘revelations’ their value is to be measured finally in terms of the paradigmatic or ‘standard’ or model religion, whatever that may be (Christianity, Buddhism, Islam etc.). However, the fourth

position makes use of the important notion of the 'development' of what I have called the original revelation of a religion. In the discussion of ecumenism between the Christian Churches it has been recognised that certain values may be developed in one form of Christianity and not in others. So also it could be argued that in the wider sphere of the world religions, certain authentic religious values that are implicitly in the Christian revelation, but which have not been actually developed or actualised within the historical forms of Christianity, may be manifested or expressed in Hinduism or Buddhism or Islam etc. Of course, the same is true of the other religions *vis-a-vis* Christianity and the other world religions. (But, as I have remarked, the notion of 'development' badly needs clarification).

A pluralism of autonomous and incommensurable revelations

Some Christian thinkers have attempted to meet the difficulties of the third position, namely that it does not sufficiently recognise the autonomy of other religions, by taking up a much more radical position which sees Christianity as simply one among a number of competing, completely autonomous and quasi-incommensurable 'revelations'. Thus John Hick argues for a theocentric religious perspective that would replace our present Christocentric view: Christianity would then become one approach to God among a number of other, equally valid, approaches (Hick 1977). Again, in a recent essay, Pannikar argues that because Reality transcends human consciousness there can be multiple or plural human approaches to Reality in the world religions. They are, as it were, different windows onto Reality, each autonomously valid in their own way. The appropriate response to this realisation is what Pannikar calls, 'cosmic confidence' which enables us to be sure that what we do not fully understand or may appear to be contradictory and unintelligible, will ultimately prove not to be so. There is, Pannikar claims, an 'invisible harmony' among the many different and apparently discordant religious revelations (Pannikar 1988).

In Pannikar's later work he distinguishes between 'Christ' as a universal principle - the most powerful symbol of the absolute reality which Pannikar calls 'the Mystery' - and Jesus, an historical figure who expresses or is an epiphany of the Christ symbol. According to Pannikar, while it is correct to say that 'Jesus is Christ', that is a particular expression of the universal Christ, it is not correct to say that 'Christ is Jesus'. After all, the eternal Christ, or the Second Person of the Trinity, or the Logos, existed before the historical Jesus. As we have noted, for Pannikar, Jesus is a special epiphany of the Christ principle but the latter is also expressed in other religious figures and also has other names such as Rama or Krishna. Each name is an expression of the same Mystery and each manifests an unknown dimension of Christ (Pannikar 1981)⁵.

An even more radical version of this pluralist theory has been proposed by the remarkable French Islamicist, Henry Corbin for whom pluralism and diversity is a necessary and inescapable feature of religion or 'the divine'. When the **one**

transcendent reality is manifested in the world of human history it cannot but be manifested or revealed, Corbin argues, as **many**, that is, as diverse and plural. Drawing on the great neo-Platonist, Proclus, the 12th century Persian Zoroastrian thinker, Sohrawardi and the 12th century Spanish Muslim thinker Ibn Al'Arabi, Corbin sums up this idea in the striking phrase *Non Deus nisi Dii* ("There is no God without Gods"). "It is", he says, "in the very nature of the *Theotes* (*deitas abscondita*) to be revealed and made manifest by the plurality of its theophanies, in an unlimited number of theophanic forms" ⁶.

There is a strong connection here with the neo-Platonic doctrine that the transcendent One is necessarily refracted into many 'eternal forms' which are in turn expressed in a multiplicity of 'sensible forms' as they come to be manifested in the world of space and time and materiality (Hadot 1988). Corbin argues that we must resist the temptation to see the different theophanies as partial or fragmentary. In one sense they are partial as compared with the hidden divinity of which they are manifestations, but in another sense they are not, since the fullness of *Theotes* is in each. "The uniquely Divine aspires to be revealed and can only be revealed in multiple theophanies. Each one is autonomous, different from the other, each quite close to being a hypostasis, yet at the same time the totality of Theotes is in each theophanic form". Corbin claims that Jewish and Christian monotheism confuses "the uniqueness of Divinity (*Theotes*) with a singular God (*theos*) which excludes other gods (*theoi*)" and he argues for the recognition of a pluralism of theophanic forms. (In passing, one must remember that Christian monotheism is radically qualified by the doctrine of the Trinity of the divine Persons in orthodox Christianity).

This opens the way, he says, for a return of the idea of the Angels (as in Proclus and also in the Jewish Kabbala). "The Angel is the Face that our God takes for us, and each of us finds his God only when he recognises that Face. The service which we can render others is to help them to encounter that Face" (Corbin 1981).

Corbin's extraordinary theory obviously has revolutionary implications for our concept of God or the Divine and of God's relationship with the world of human history, and above all for the Christian view of God's unique incarnation and revelation in Jesus Christ. If Corbin were right we could contemplate the possibility of a plurality of 'incarnations' of which the incarnation of Jesus would simply be one. If the syncretist/relativist position we looked at before sees the various religious systems as different paths up the same mountain, Corbin's position almost suggests that there are a number of quite different (incommensurable) mountains, or in other words multiple revelations (Spacing suddenly increases).

Multiple revelations: difficulties

However, attractive as some aspects of Corbin's theory about religious diversity are - it certainly recognises the autonomy and integrity of each of the religious revelations - it clearly depends upon a full-blown neo-Platonic metaphysics where the One is necessarily expressed in a multiplicity of forms. And, quite apart from the

intrinsic difficulties of that metaphysical theory, there is another difficulty in that, as a specific philosophical position, it conflicts with the philosophical theories that are bound up implicitly with other religious systems. Thus, as we have seen, for both Pannikar and Corbin religious diversity is explained and made acceptable, on the basis of a philosophical theory which sharply distinguishes between God or Reality on the one hand and its manifestations or 'theophanies' on the other. But in many religious systems it is not possible to make such a distinction. Thus, for example, in the dGe lugs Buddhist tradition of the Dalai Lama, which is bound up with the philosophical ideas of the Madhyamaka movement in Indian Buddhism, there is no Absolute Reality and the ultimate truth is the realisation that there is no Absolute but 'emptiness'. As it has been put, "Emptiness equals absence of inherent existence, which is to say lacking ultimate existence or essence. When Madhyamika Buddhists say something is 'empty', they mean that it does not exist from its own side apart from, say, its parts. All, absolutely all, is dependent, relative. Emptiness is the ultimate truth - that is the ultimate truth is told when we say that all things, no matter how exalted, be they Buddha, Nirvana or worms are empty of ultimate, i.e. independent, existence. The range of this even includes emptiness itself (Williams 1991:516). The Buddhists of this tradition then simply reject Pannikar's and Corbin's philosophical framework which enables them to make a place for religious pluralism in the radical way described. Pannikar can only justify his theory that the many different religious systems are 'windows' looking out on Reality in terms of philosophical theory and the same is true of Corbin's theophanies of the 'hidden' Divinity.

One might mention in passing that to some extent the same is true of Australian Aboriginal religions which are profoundly immanentist in orientation so that it is difficult to make the distinction - common in Judaism, Christianity and Islam - between a transcendent sphere of the Divine and the local manifestations of the transcendent reality. In Australian Aboriginal religions spiritual power resides *in* the land and natural phenomena. No doubt, in the mythic stories that spiritual power (*karunpa*, *awangarr* as it variously called) is deposited in the land by the Ancestor Spirits in the primordial beginning of things, but the Ancestor Spirits are not gods nor theophanic beings nor even exemplars of Divinity. In such a religious system it is impossible to make the neo-Platonic distinction between the one Divinity and the multiple theophanies which is the basis for Pannikar's and Corbin's theoretical solutions to the problem of religious diversity.

Similar reservations have been made regarding cultural differences about the nature of time between the Hindu and Taoist cyclic view of time and the Christian linear view. In Hinduism and Taoism the incarnation of Jesus Christ as an individual historical event is difficult to conceptualise. Christ as the universal Logos is easier to conceptualise within these cultures and it is doubtless because of this that Pannikar and others have focussed on the 'universal Christ'⁷.

Conclusion

We seem then to be left with the fourth position outlined above as the best solution we have to the problem of religious diversity. No doubt this will be far too radical for some religious believers in that, while it allows a believer to hold that his or her religion has some kind of special or paradigmatic status, it also admits that genuine religious developments (indeed religious revelations) may take place in other religions. On the other hand, it will not be radical enough for other people who will see it as denying the integrity and autonomy of other religious ways and sanctioning some degree of religious exclusivity and ‘intolerance’. In other words, by seeing Christianity as having some essential core of truth that Buddhism lacks, I am claiming superiority for Christianity. And vice versa, if I claim that Buddhism is the privileged way of enlightenment, I am claiming superiority for Buddhism *vis-a-vis* Christianity.

A final point: in one sense the problem of religious diversity is a philosophical problem: how can we make sense of a situation where various religious systems are making what appear to be mutually contradictory truth-claims? In another sense, to speak from a Christian perspective, the problem of religious diversity is a theological problem where we are ultimately confronted with a ‘mystery’ which cannot be wholly explained by philosophical means but which can be shown not to involve a formal contradiction which would render it unintelligible and unbelievable. In traditional Christian Trinitarian theology, for example, the ‘mystery’ is how the unicity of God is reconciled with the recognition that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are properly described as ‘God’. Since we cannot say that there are three Gods, nor that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are merely three aspects of the one God, the philosophical notion of ‘person’ is introduced, not to **explain** the Trinity but, in a sense, to make it clear that belief in the Trinity does not on the one hand, involve belief in the existence of three Gods and (as Muslim critics believe) the rejection of the unicity of God, and does not on the other hand, involve a belief that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are mere aspects of the one God. Allowing for the moment that the theological notion of ‘person’ is meaningful, its function is a negative one in that it tells the believer how **not** to see the Trinity.

In the case of religious diversity, the ‘mystery’ is how there can be a reconciliation of the truth that God (because he is good and compassionate) desires that all human beings be saved or achieve enlightenment and that they have, in some way, access to the means of salvation or enlightenment through some mode of revelation; and, on the other hand, the truth that there is in reality *prima facie* a diversity of religious revelations. We cannot **explain** in any positive sense how this reconciliation is possible, but we can, perhaps show what is **not** involved in believing that God wills that all should be offered the means of salvation or enlightenment and on the other hand, recognition of the fact of religious diversity.

Operationally, what does all this abstruse speculation mean for the ordinary religious believer who confronts the problem of religious diversity? Let us put our

reply in the form of a credo for the religious believer.

1. I believe that 'God'⁸ wills that all should be saved or achieve enlightenment and that all human beings have access to the means of salvation or enlightenment through some mode of revelation.
2. I believe (as a Christian, or a Jew, or a Muslim, or a Hindu or Buddhist etc.) that my religious tradition has a privileged and paradigmatic status and that 'God' has revealed himself most completely - even if not exclusively - in that tradition.
3. I believe that certain authentic religious values which are implicit or latent within my tradition, but which have not actually been developed within that tradition, may be manifested or expressed in other religious traditions.
4. I believe that there is also the possibility of authentic religious revelations, complementary to the paradigmatic revelation of my tradition but 'outside' my own tradition and, in a sense, incommensurable with it.
5. I believe that religious diversity is in some sense willed by 'God' and has its own intrinsic meaning and purpose and is not merely the result of sin and ignorance.
6. I believe that respect for, openness to, and dialogue with, other religious traditions, must be part of any authentic religious tradition.

Religious believers have to work out what this credo means with regard to their own particular religion and what kind of restructuring of belief and the institutions of belief it requires. One might say that this is a task even more radical and momentous than that which confronted the early Christian communities when they realised that the second coming of Jesus was not imminent.

References

- Barnes, M. 1989. *Christian identity and religious pluralism*. SPCK, London.
- Charlesworth, M. 1997. *Religious inventions: four essays*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Cobb, J B. 1975. *Christ in a pluralistic age*. Westminster Press, Philadelphia.
- Corbin, H., 1981. A letter from Henry Corbin. In *The new polytheism*, (preface) by David L. Miller. Spring Publications, Dallas, Texas.
- Carbezon, J I. (ed.). 1988. *The Bodhgaya interviews: His Holiness, The Dalai Lama*. Snow Lion, New York.
- Daniélou, J. 1957. *Holy pagans of the Old Testament*. Helicon, Baltimore.
- Davies, O. 1991. *Meister Eckhart: mystical theologian*. SPCK, London.
- D'Costa, G. 1986. *Theology and religious pluralism: the challenge of other religions*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Derrida, J. 1985. Des tours de Babel. In *Difference in translation*, edited by Joseph F Graham, 165-67. Cornell University Press, 1985, Ithaca, New York.
- Driver, T. 1987. The case for pluralism. In *The myth of Christian uniqueness: towards a pluralistic theology of religion*, edited by John Hick and Paul Knitter, 203-218. Orbis Books;

New York.

Hadot, P. (ed.). 1988. *Plotin: Traité 38:7*. Les Editions du Cerf, Paris.

Hadot, P. 1995. *Philosophy as a way of life*. Blackwell, Cambridge, England.

Hick, J. and P Knitter. (eds.) 1987. *The myth of Christian uniqueness: towards a pluralistic theology of religion*. Orbis, New York.

Hick, J. 1977. Jesus and the World Religions. In *The myth of God incarnate*, edited by J. Hick, 167-185. SCM Press, London.

Knitter, P. 1985. *No other name? A critical survey of Christian attitudes towards the world religions*. Orbis, New York.

Küng, H and J Moltmann. (eds.). 1986. *Christianity among the world religions*. T&T Clark, Edinburgh. (Concilium, 183. Glen Rock, New Jersey).

Lewis, B. 1992. Muslims, Christians and Jews: the dream of coexistence. *The New York Review of Books* March 26: 46.

Nasr, S H. 1986. The Islamic view of Christianity. In *Christianity among the world religions*, edited by Hans Küng and J. Moltmann. T&T Clark, Edinburgh. (Concilium, 183. Glen Rock, New Jersey).

Oxtoby, W G. 1983. *The meaning of other faiths*. Westminster Press, Philadelphia

Phan, P C. (ed.). 1991. *Christianity and the wider ecumenism*. Orbis, New York.

Pinnikar, R. 1988. The invisible harmony: a universal theory of religion or a cosmic confidence in reality. In *Towards a universal theology of religion*, edited by L. Swidler. Orbis, New York.

Pannikar, R. 1984. Religious pluralism; the metaphysical challenge. In *Religious pluralism*, edited by Leroy S. Rouner University of Notre Dame Press, Boston.

Pannikar, R. 1981. *The unknown Christ of Hinduism: towards an ecumenical Christophany*. Orbis, New York.

Rahner, K. 1979. The one Christ and the universality of salvation. In *Theological Investigations 16* by Karl Rahner, 219. Darton, Longman and Todd, London.

Rahner, K. 1966. Christianity and the non-Christian religions. In *Theological Investigations 5* by Karl Rahner, 115-134. Darton, Longman and Todd, London..

Schuon, F. 1984. *The transcendental unity of religions*. Quest Books, Wheaton, Illinois.

Smith, Mark J. 1990. *The early history of God: Yahweh and other deities in ancient Israel*. Harper & Row, San Francisco.

Sykes, S. 1984. *The identity of Christianity: theologians and the essence of Christianity*. Philadelphia.

Vatican Secretariat for non-Christians. 1984. The attitude of the church towards the followers of other religions: reflections and orientations on dialogue, mission. *Bulletin Secretariatus pro non Christianis* 56:117-241.

Williams, P. 1991. Some dimensions of the recent work of Raimundo Pannikar; a Buddhist perspective. *Religious Studies* 27: 520.

Wong, J H. 1994. Anonymous Christians: Karl Rahner's pneuma-Christocentrism and an east-west dialogue. *Theological Studies* 55: 609-637.

Zaehner, R C. 1968. *The Bhagavad Gita*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Endnotes

1. See Vatican Secretariat for non-Christians (1984).
2. See the ingenious interpretation of the Tower of Babel myth by Jacques Derrida (1985) who sees God's 'deconstruction' of the Tower, meant to unify heaven and earth, as a deconstruction of the vain human hope for literal and universal unity of meaning.
3. On Eckhart see De Libera (1991), chapter VIII. See also the illuminating study by Oliver Davies (1991), especially chapter 9, *Mister Eckhart and Christian Orthodoxy*.
4. On the development of Rahner's thought on world religions see the remarkable article by Joseph H. Wong (1994).
5. See also the work of John B. Cobb (1975), which distinguishes between Christ as the Logos or the transcendent principle of 'creative transformation' in the world, and Jesus as the perfect incarnation of the Logos and the supreme embodiment of humanity.
6. I am grateful to David Tacey's unpublished paper, *Many Gods, Many Ways and the Sacred* for this reference to Corbin.
7. See Wong (1994), for a brilliant attempt to reconcile Rahner's Christological and Trinitarian position with classical Taoism.
8. 'God' here is taken to mean any source of revelation or disclosure of 'the divine'.