

The Negotiation of Religious Diversity in Christian Theology

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Introduction

This concluding session of the conference attempts to tie up a number of loose ends regarding religious diversity by examining theoretical and evaluative approaches to 'other' religions from within religious traditions, to use a broad and convenient if somewhat misleading term¹, 'theologies' of religions. I will use Christianity, and especially Catholic Christianity, as the paradigm simply because it is my tradition, and one of my major arguments is that we must perforce begin where we are, but I shall at times suggest possibilities for 'theologies' from other traditions. In any case, this presentation is intended to open up discussion in general forum - not to be comprehensive.

Paradigms in Theology of Religions

All religious traditions, all religious institutions, all religious people today are faced with the problem of negotiating diversity. I prefer 'negotiating' to 'managing' not only because it is less 'managerial' in tone and less 'top-down' but also because it implies difficulty, trial and error, frequent changes of direction and the negotiating of a personal and institutional pilgrimage². One important aspect of negotiating religious diversity is accommodating diversity within a tradition's or sub-tradition's own self-understanding, its systematic exposition of its identity and its theology.

The now classic modern paradigms for Christian theology of religions are: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism (Race 1983; Knitter 1984). In very general terms, exclusivism insists that salvation is only possible within Christianity in a formal sense. Inclusivism allows salvation outside Christianity, but attributes it to Christ. Pluralism attributes salvation precisely to those religions and denies any special status to Christianity (or any other religion). It should be noted that, in principle, there could be Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim etc. theologies of religion which might take exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist forms; and, in fact, I would argue that they are found, under different labels, of course, in most traditions.

Exclusivism

Exclusivism has probably been the most common position through Christian history. The mind-set which fed it was given classic form in Tertullian's famous remark, "What, then, has Athens to do with Jerusalem. That is, Christianity is self-sufficient and unique. Its theological foundation is a belief that Christ and Christianity

are the sole vehicles for salvation. In modern theology, Karl Barth has given this thesis a new twist with his claim that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ means “the abolition of religion” (1957); and his disciple, Hendrik Kraemer, in *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (1938), and *Religion and the Christian Faith* (1956) has applied it to the world religions³. There are, of course, Catholic as well as Protestant exponents of exclusivism (van Straelen 1966)⁴.

Many versions of exclusivism have ‘escape clauses’, such as the Catholic doctrine of Limbo, or a resort to the mystery of God’s interaction with individual men and women. But exclusivism has also been a powerful motivating force in missionary action. The picture given in many biographies of a St. Francis Xavier driven by a vision of the hell awaiting the unbaptised (Brodrick 1952:437-8; Schurhammer 1982:235-6) rests on slim documentary evidence⁵ (1992:235-6) but it is probably psychologically and historically accurate.

Inclusivism

Inclusivism, in nascent form, is found in the early Fathers of the Church, for example in Justin Martyr’s famous statement from *The Second Apology*: “Everything that the philosophers and the legislators discovered and expressed well, they accomplished through their discovery and contemplation of some part of the Logos”.

But its deepest theological development has been in this century. A classic and economic expression is found in Karl Rahner’s essay, *Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions* (Rahner 1966:115-134)⁶ and in the early writings of Hans Küng. More recently, Küng has been moving towards a postmodernist variety of pluralism (Küng 1988:236, 250; Küng and Ching 1989; Küng and Kuschel 1963)⁷. Küng, in a 1964 seminar paper (Küng 1967)⁸ characterised his position at the time by six propositions which may stand as representative:

- a) Despite whatever truth they may possess concerning God, the world religions are at the same time in error.
- b) The world religions do, though in error, proclaim God’s truth.
- c) As against the ‘extraordinary’ way of salvation which is the Church, the world religions can be called - if this is rightly understood - the ‘ordinary’ way of salvation for non-Christian humanity.
- d) The world religions teach the truth of Christ, whom in their error they do not recognise for what he really is: the Truth.
- e) It is Jesus Christ who is able to liberate the truth of the world from its entanglement in error and sin,

Christian faith represents a radical universalism, but one grounded and made concrete in, centered upon, Jesus Christ (Küng 1965:51-6).

Even then, however, Küng was uneasy about aspects of Rahner’s thesis, not the least the use of the phrase, “anonymous Christians” (Küng 1965:55-6). Was this not ultimately condescending, imperialistic, denying the specificities of the faiths held by believers? These concerns would eventually turn Küng in the direction of

pluralism. I would add the further, and very relevant to us, point that his focus on 'world religions' would seem to exclude religions with a very local or land base such as those of Australian Aborigines.

It is inclusivism that underpins the Second Vatican Council's *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)* (Abbott 1966:656-71)⁹. This grew out of the Council schema on ecumenism, and provoked one of the few non-Western interventions at that rather non-ecumenical gathering when, during the first session, Bishop Zhang Zuohuan, commenting on the draft ecumenism schema, and clearly drawing on Rahner's arguments about the universal salvific will of God, remarked: "Let us add chapters on Buddhism and Confucianism. This is absolutely indispensable. The Word of God has illuminated all men, whatever religion they belong to. All religions, which are adapted to different sensibilities, have a relation to the true church" (*Le Monde*, 23.10.1963)¹⁰.

The negative side of inclusivism is a tendency to see salvation as eventuating despite, not through the doctrines and practices of believers in religions other than Christianity. Jean Daniélou, a pioneer in the advocacy of serious inter-religious dialogue and theological engagement in his work on Buddhism, wrote in 1966: "But if it is certain that God's grace can and does save pagan souls through those religions which they profess, it still cannot be said that these religions as such are economies of salvation. For salvation is only in Jesus Christ" (Daniélou 1966:47)¹¹.

It is the patent deficiencies of this position that lead many to move beyond inclusivism to a wider position that will precisely allow 'economies of salvation' within other traditions. An excellent brief account of this shift is to be found in the first essay, *The diversity of revelations* in Charlesworth (1997).

Pluralism

The pluralist position has been strongly associated with John Hick (1989)¹² and Paul Knitter (1985). It rests on, but moves beyond, a recognition of the fact of religious pluralism and the inevitability of religious interaction in the contemporary world to the proclamation of a new paradigm for theology which draws on all the major religious traditions of the world. 'Pluralism' is perhaps a misleading label because of the ambiguity between recognition of the *de facto* plurality of religions and an assertion of its necessity and desirability. It is the latter that seems to be the real agenda of many 'pluralists' as Raimundo Panikkar's alternative label of 'parallelism' brings out. Panikkar sees the implications of the position as: "Religions would then be parallel paths and our most urgent duty would be not to interfere with others, not to convert them or even to borrow from them, but to deepen our own respective traditions so that we may meet at the end, and in the depths of our own traditions" (Panikkar 1978:xviii).

However, 'pluralism' has become entrenched so I will use it throughout for this kind of principled parallelism. Furthermore, the image of parallel lines raises new problems. Despite Panikkar's explicit avowal of a meeting in the end - strictly,

parallels can never by definition meet. If paradigmatic images are required I would prefer something like Hans Urs von Balthasar's 'symphony', all contributing to a harmonious whole but not necessarily equally, and certainly not in the same way ('Truth is symphonic' is the title of von Balthasar (1972)).

There are many varieties of pluralist theologies of religion: monist¹³ world theology (Smith 1981), hybrid theologies¹⁴, dialogical theologies (Panikkar 1978; Panikkar 1990; Amaladoss 1990)¹⁵, liberationist (Pieris 1988) and postmodern versions. Not all share Hick's basic premise of "the non-absoluteness of Christianity", at least in the form propounded by Hick (1987)¹⁶. What they have in common, however, is a claim that even a Christian theology of religions cannot be built on an exclusively Christian base, that dialogue between religions is a two-way process built on respect and sympathetic understanding, that salvation must be seen to come through not despite the systems and insights of the other traditions, and that the experiential dimension of religion is crucial.

Furthermore, individual theologians and theorists do not always fit neatly into this three-fold categorisation. Karl Rahner, in particular, has in my view been frequently misrepresented. Rahner's 'anonymous Christians' thesis is not the arrogant assertion of Christian superiority it is often claimed to be. It rests on Rahner's theological 'anthropology', which he calls "the infinite horizon of human questioning" (1978:32), the mystery of human being. His position is not really, as often claimed, an exclusivist/inclusivist hybrid, but rather an inclusivist/pluralist one. In some ways it is a very postmodern one - that it all depends on your standpoint. Rahner's reply to the Japanese Buddhist Nishitani's query, "What would you say if I were to treat you as an anonymous Zen Buddhist?" that he might and should do so *from his point of view* (1979:219), implies that we may, I would say inevitably and inescapably must, interpret the other in our own categories and relate it to our experiences.

I am sympathetic to the view that all this theory seems remote from the concerns of those engaged in dialogue with other religions. Praxis, whether Catholic Liberationist, or Protestant 'Social Gospel'; spiritual/experiential or institutional must often proceed tentatively, not programatically on the personal rather than formal level. On the institutional level, ecclesiologies may be more significant than theologies of religion in determining outcomes (Wong 1994)¹⁷.

If to be a pluralist theologian one must embrace the whole of human religious experience, who can be such a paragon? Raimundo Pannikar writes of his attempts at 'multireligious experience' (Pannikar 1978:12-13), but in practice has restricted himself to the encounter between the Indian and Christian strands that are part of his own inheritance. Hans Küng's *Christianity and the World Religions* (1987) and his *Christianity and Chinese Religions* (1989) were multi-author projects, although one might question his choice of interlocutors, fellow Tübingen professors in the case of the first, and a Chinese Christian¹⁸ in the second. Even John Hick whose *An Interpretation of Religion* manages to cover so much admits: "There are indeed

whole regions, such as the religious life of China, that I have largely (though not entirely) to leave aside. Again, in concentrating on the ‘great world religions’ I have given primal religion less attention than it ought to have” (Hick 1989:xiii)¹⁹.

Further, I find much pluralist theology infected by questionable postmodernist assumptions: an inadequate philosophical basis, a misreading of intellectual history and an implicit socio-political conservatism. Unfortunately, however, to pursue these important issues would take us beyond the scope of this paper.

Pluralist theology while lauding diversity is simultaneously and unrealistically optimistic about the possibilities of transcending our particularities. Global perspectives have often exacerbated rather than improved relations between religions (Panikkar 1978:vxiii-xix). Paul Knitter has acknowledged this recently when he writes: “Thanks to the chidings of my postmodern friends, I have realized over the past years that I, like many proponents of religious pluralism, have too hastily hoisted the banner of ‘pluralism’ before sufficiently recognizing the reality of ‘plurality’. We pluralists have been too quick to propose an ‘ism’ or a system on the vast buzzing array of plurality; and in so *proposing* we have *imposed*” (Knitter 1995:2)²⁰.

Finally, as a teacher of religious studies, may I be excused for my scepticism about Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s belief that it is the religious studies academics who will forge a ‘global’ theology or ‘world’ theology. My scepticism is even greater over the subtitle of his *Toward a World Theology* (1981), namely ‘*Faith and the Comparative History of Religions*. It is precisely ‘faith’ that usually eludes the historian of religion.

Cantwell Smith himself, in his earlier writings, (Smith 1963; Smith 1972) insisted that faith not doctrines, belief not beliefs, ought to be the focus of the study of religions. The problem with this position is that faith itself seems the most difficult to access of all religious phenomena. In fact, it is hardly phenomenal at all. I would suggest, however, that spirituality is open to the historian. I do not use the term, as is so often the case, to avoid the pitfalls of the term ‘religion’ (Zinnbauer 1997) but in the technical sense of attitudes and consequent practices characteristic of a specific religious tradition or sub-tradition.

One of the great practitioners of pluralistic religious dialogue focusing on spirituality was the great Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton. His exchanges, mostly at a distance, with Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist²¹ and other serious religious people, as well as artists, writers and thinkers, are now available in his published letters. Apart from the insights they give into an extraordinary personality, playful and profound, disciplined and free, they show how from a secure base within his own tradition a man of prayer, probably a mystic, reached out to the other traditions of the world.

Merton, although he taught theology in his monastery, frequently expressed his distaste for the style of Tridentine theology then prescribed. He wrote: “The theology of our time, to be authentic, needs to be the kind that escapes practically all religious definition. Because there has been endless definition, endless verbalising, and words

have become gods. There are so many words that one cannot get to God as long as He is thought to be on the side of the words, but when he is placed firmly beyond the other side of words, the words multiply like flies and there is a great buzzing religion, very profitable, very holy, very spurious" (Merton 1993:225).

Religious encounter, he thought, could only be on the experiential level. He described himself as like Jonas, "travelling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox" (Merton 1952:11); and part of the Mertonian paradox was the misfit between his religious (and secular) experience and the fairly narrow spiritual discipline and theology in which he was trained. He was not, like John Hick, in search of 'the Real', a conceptual commonality beyond the cultural *Personae* of world religions (Hick 1989)²² but seeking out common experiences of ultimate 'Mystery'. His was what Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called 'basal-ecumenism' as opposed to 'summit-ecumenism' (Chardin 1968:197-8). It aimed beyond communication between the traditions at a 'communion' which was 'preverbal' and 'postverbal' (Merton 1973:315).

It was in spirituality, in mysticism, in shared religious quest that the world would come together, or not at all, according to Merton, through 'metaphysical experience' not 'metaphysical systems'²³. This quest went beyond our religious experiences; our 'raids on the unspeakable'²⁴ had to embrace shared human ethical responsibilities for world peace, and the struggle against racism and economic oppression. This seems to me to be a kind of religious pluralism which is itself genuinely religious, and one which has rarely been seen in the history of interreligious contact but when it has, it's effect has been good.

Conclusion

Let me bring this introduction to a conclusion by some bold assertions to stimulate discussion:

1. I think there is a sense in which any *theology* of religion must necessarily be either exclusivist or inclusivist. Theology being the self interpretation and evaluation of a tradition must proceed from a viewpoint inside a tradition. A pluralist theology of religions is, in this sense, a contradiction in terms.
2. On the other hand, any theology of religions in our age of globalisation of religion as well as political economies must in some way be pluralist, must take into account the fact of the existence of other religions and, more importantly, of believers in other religions. It must, I would further argue, concede truth and authenticity to those traditions. In other words, exclusivism raises insuperable problems not only for world peace and ecumenical engagement but for theology itself. Is a God who restricts His (Her?) action to a portion of humankind a plausible God?
3. In practice, then, I conceive a world religious dialogue in which inclusivist theologies of various traditions engage with each other, seek to go beyond Merton's buzz of words to the experiences that lie behind them.

4. Finally, this is where I see religious studies, the scientific study of religion or whatever term you favour, as playing an important role. Classic religious studies have been concerned with words. I do not believe that we have been wrestling with shadows in our attempts to reach some understanding across cultures and time about the meaning of the words used in the religions of the world. We are of course, only too aware of the difficulties and tentativeness of the enterprise but despite postmodernist attempts at delegitimation, I agree with Umberto Eco (1990) that scholarship can and should place limits and determine probabilities in the flux of interpretation. Indefinite deferral is unnecessary, undesirable and ultimately impossible. The results of such investigations may be to widen the gap between the respective verbalisations of traditions but it may also uncover commonalities, functional analogies and structural homologies. At the very least it may encourage real engagement between theologies and people. As the very last sentence of the *Sayings of Confucius* points out: "If you do not understand their words, how can you understand people".
5. The study of religious experience through the methods of the social sciences, especially anthropology, sociology and psychology may further contribute to the theology of religions by opening up what Merton calls the 'preverbal' and 'postverbal'. If the result is simply to substitute a new 'would-be universal' but in fact culture-specific language for the diverse theological languages of the religions of the world then it will be counter productive. But at its best phenomenological analysis may open up what Raimundo Pannikar calls "the silence of the word" (Pannikar 1974; Pannikar 1997).
6. Finally, while religious studies is not theology and the often painful separation of the two enterprises has been to the benefit of both, I think the current state of the relationship in Australia is far from healthy. The eschewing of evaluation professed by many in religious studies may be in itself a form of 'false consciousness', a concealment of *de facto* value judgements. Theology of religions may help us to manage religious diversity by making explicit the values and points of view brought to bear on the study of the other.

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Endnotes

1. 'Theology' is, of course, misleading in, say, the Buddhist context where there is no 'theos'; and the kind of systematic abstract discipline we call theology has no exact parallel in many other religious traditions. Nevertheless, there are functional equivalents in most if not all traditions.
2. Since presenting this paper I have come across Judith Berling's recent book (1997) which exemplifies perfectly this usage and deals with religious diversity within the Chinese tradition as well as the engagement of Christianity and Chinese religion.
3. Kraemer, is critical of aspects of Barth's exegesis of *Romans*, which appears to deny revelation apart from Christ (1956: 309), and in his comments on Paul Althaus' critique of Barth, comes close to inclusivism (1956:358-9) when he states: "all modes of revelation find their source, their meaning and criterion in Jesus Christ, and that the final revelation of God's righteousness in Christ is the final revelation in the light of which Jesus Christ is the Truth, the *only* Truth, without whom no man comes to the Father".
4. van Straelen (1966) is written explicitly to counter the views expressed at the 1964 Bombay seminar mentioned below, where Hans Küng and others spoke.
5. I presume it is based on the two brief references in Xavier's letters from Japan on the Japanese revulsion over his teaching that their ancestors were in Hell and could not be rescued by prayer (Xavier 1992:336,341).
6. A lecture given on April 1961 to the Abendländische Akademie.
7. Küng categorises Rahner's position as a variety of inclusivism but oddly couples it with Indian "relativisation and loss of identity" of the other (1988:236) and proceeds to a postmodern paradigm in which one simply "proclaims one's religion as 'for me the true religion'" (1988:250). The implications of Küng's views are spelled out in 'The Declaration of the Parliament of World's Religions' which he drafted (Küng and Kuschel 1963).
8. The paper was given at the 1964 Bombay seminar on 'Christian Revelation and the Non-Christian Religions'.
9. There has been considerable argument as to whether *Nostra Aetate* went beyond exclusivism. I share Paul Knitter's view that it did do so implicitly, despite the careful language designed not explicitly repudiate old formulae. There was an exchange between Knitter and Mikka Ruokanen in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, (1990), on the subject, subsequently reprinted in M. Ruokanen (1992).
10. Session of 22 November 1963 (the day president Kennedy was assassinated) translated from the *Le Monde* report, 23 November 1963.
11. For a discussion of Daniélou's denial that non-Christian religions could be the 'means of salvation', see Sheard (1987:14-21).
12. Hick's views have been developing over many years but may be best seen in his 1986-7 *Gifford Lectures* published in Hick (1989).
13. I use this term to categorise Hick's theology of the 'Real' in order to emphasise its reductionist tendencies, its assertion of a 'God' behind the *Personae* and *Impersonae* of world religions, not to claim that Hick propounds philosophical monism. 'Perennial philosophy' in its many versions might be regarded as another variant although I would prefer to categorise it an a peculiar version of exclusivism.

14. My term to cover such attempts at reinterpretation of Christianity in terms of non-Christian systems as Neville (1982), Kennan (1989), Cobb and Ives (1990) and Smart and Konstantine (1991).

15. Of which I would regard Raimundo Panikkar as the exemplar. Panikkar and Dom Bede Griffiths have also been leading exponents of the practice as well as theory of dialogue between Christianity and Indian religions.

16. Gavin D'Costa who is sympathetic to pluralism but ultimately seems to remain an inclusivist (see D'Costa 1986) has mounted an excellent critique of the excesses of Hick's variety of pluralism (D'Costa 1990). I would note also Paul Knitter's claim that while he rejects 'the exclusive uniqueness of Jesus' he affirms the 'universal and relational uniqueness' of Jesus i.e. 'the message of Jesus must be related to the possible message God gives through others' (Ruokanen 1992:155-6). I confess that what Knitter might mean by 'relational uniqueness' remains opaque to me despite the clarifications in his most recent essay in this direction in Swidlet and Mojzes (1997).

17. Joseph Wong attempts to combine exclusivist, inclusivist, pluralist typology with Peter Schineller's ecclesiocentric, Christocentric, theocentric categories.

18. Julia Ching who, while admirably equipped to be an informant on Chinese religions, is not the kind of intra-tradition dialogue partner that pluralism seems to demand.

19. I can only agree with this comment since these are precisely my own areas of expertise, and he seems to me to make some serious misinterpretations in both. For example, Hick's treatment of myth (1989:347-59) has no relation to my experience of Australian Aboriginal mythology; and his remarks about Tao [*Dao*] as a 'god concept' (1989:257, 338) seem remote from Daoist theory or practice.

20. I am indebted for this quotation and many other things in this section of the paper to my former doctoral student, Mervyn Bendle, whose thesis offers a vigorous defence of postmodern pluralism.

21. Perhaps the most serious of his interests in Asian religions were Zen Buddhism - he had a prolonged exchange with Daisetz Suzuki- and Daoism. His *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (1970) is a remarkable exception to the rule that those with no Chinese should avoid 'translating' Chinese texts. Spiritual affinity overcomes lack of scholarship in this case. The best evidence for Merton's position on theology of religions vis a vis Asia is to be found in his *Asian Journal* (1973), written during his Asian journey in 1968 which ended in his accidental death in Bangkok.

22. See Johnston (1978:16) on the impossibility, for the present at least, of Buddhism and Christianity speaking the same language.

23. In a letter to Mas[a]o Abe, 12 May 1967, in which he endorses "a consideration of Christian mystical experience as a meeting ground" between Japanese religion and Christianity. He also mentions ontology, adding characteristically, "though some would hold there is no such thing" (Merton 1994:331-332).

24. The title of a collection of Merton's essays (Merton 1977) on peace and other issues published at the height of the nuclear crisis.