The Modern Theologians

An introduction to Christian theology in the twentieth century

SECOND EDITION

Edited by
David F. Ford
University of Cambridge

© 1997 BLACKWELL Publishers
Introduction

Christianity was born into a religiously pluralist world and has remained in one ever since. At different times in its history it has been especially sensitive to this context. The mandate to go preach the gospel to the corners of the earth as well as its own socioeconomic political position in society has resulted in a complex range of relations and responses to other religions. In the modern period, and especially in the West, it stands unsure of its own distinct nature and deeply aware of its implication in various imperialist exploits. Christians in the modern world cannot ignore the existence of other religions. Global communications, extensive travel, migration, colonialism, and international trade are all factors that have brought the religions closer to each other in both destructive and creative ways.

A brief look at some statistics may help, although their reliability is a problem, no less than their interpretation. Compare, for instance, the difference between 1491 and 1991. In 1491 roughly 19 percent of the world’s population was Christian and while 2 percent of the non-Christian world was in contact with Christianity, 79 percent remained entirely ignorant of its existence. Some 93 percent of all Christians were white Europeans. Compare these figures with 1991, when 33 percent of the global population were Christians, with 44 percent of the non-Christian world being aware of Christianity, while only 23 percent had no contact with Christians and the gospel. The ethnic basis of Christianity has also radically shifted so that the largest Christian community is now to be found in Latin America, only then followed by Europe, with Africa third (and growing much faster than Europe), followed by North America and then South Asia.

To get a sense of the broader picture, it will be helpful to briefly survey the figures for 1991 regarding the numerical strengths of world religions. After Christians (roughly 1½ billion), Muslims are the largest religious group (962 million), followed by Hindus (721 million), with Buddhists then forming less than half the number of Hindus (327 million). New religions, notoriously difficult to classify, number some 119 million, followed by another amorphous classification, tribal religions which
constitute roughly 99 million. Finally, and in Western consciousness far more prominent, come Sikhs with nearly 19 million and Jews with nearly 18 million.\footnote{1}

Christians cannot ignore the existence of other religions. Furthermore, with the awareness of their existence a host of theological, philosophical, methodological, and practical questions are raised. Should, for example, Buddhist meditation groups be allowed the use of church halls? How should religious education be taught? What kind of social and political cooperation or opposition is appropriate with people of other faiths? There are also fundamental theological issues at stake. If salvation is possible outside Christ/Christianity, is the uniqueness of Christ and the universal mission of the church called into question? Or if salvation is not possible outside Christ/Christianity, is it credible that a loving God would consign the majority of humankind to perdition, often through no fault of their own? Can Christians learn from other faiths? Can they be enriched rather than diluted or polluted from this encounter? Clearly, other religions in varying degrees have also undergone their own self-questioning in the light of religious pluralism, but that is another subject.\footnote{2}

There have been many different Christian responses to the world religions. To limit ourselves to the modern period only makes things slightly easier. No set of categories is adequate to analyze and deal with the complexity of the topic, but it may help to label three types of theological response to other religions for heuristic purposes only. There are, of course, considerable differences between theologians belonging to the same “camp” and many features of overlap between different approaches. I shall call these approaches: pluralism (that all religions are equal and valid paths to the one divine reality and Christ is one revelation among many equally important revelations); exclusivism (only those who hear the gospel proclaimed and explicitly confess Christ are saved); and inclusivism (that Christ is the normative revelation of God, although salvation is possible outside of the explicit Christian church, but this salvation is always from Christ). Various presuppositions undergird each approach, often revolving around Christology and the doctrine of God and the doctrine of human beings.\footnote{3}

Survey

Pluralism

Pluralism is almost entirely a recent phenomenon within Christianity and this kind of approach has many supporters within what is sometimes called “liberal Christianity.” Although it has been prominent in Anglo-American circles, there are an increasing number of theologians in Asia that support this kind of position. However, the manner in which theologians arrive at this outcome is various and at times incompatible. Some argue that all religions have a common core or essence that can be historically identified, often within the mystical traditions of the world religions.\footnote{4} This emphasis on mysticism is also shared by what is termed the “perennial philosophy,” which has followers in different religions. Here it is argued that a straightforward historical comparison of the religions will not show this common essence,
Theology of Religions

which is only found among "esoteric" believers who have penetrated the mystical depths of their own tradition to discover the non-duality of God and the soul, a unity that transcends all formulations. "Esoteric" believers absolutize their symbols and creeds and fail to penetrate to the transcendent unity of religions. Hence, esoteric believers hold that Christ and/or the Church become the only way to salvation.

Another form of pluralism begins from a consideration of historical relativity and it is argued that all traditions are relative and cannot claim superiority over other equally limited and relative ways to salvation. Others argue that all religions have important and substantial historical differences and the view of a common essence is in danger of compromising the integrity of each particular tradition by emphasizing only one aspect of that tradition. The real unity of religions is found not in doctrine or transreligious experience and esoteric doctrines but in the common experience of salvation or liberation. This latter emphasis has often developed in dialogue with liberation theology and other religions. Others, such as the English philosopher of religion, John Hick, have developed their position mainly in dialogue with traditional Western philosophy and the world religions. It will be instructive to look in detail at Hick, who combines many of the emphases in the above approaches.

John Hick's pluralism

Initially, Hick argued that the solus Christus assumption (that salvation is only through Christ) held by exclusivists is incompatible with the Christian teaching of a God who desires to save all people. There are millions who have never heard of Christ through no fault of their own, before and after the New Testament period – the inevitably ignorant. It is therefore un-Christian to think that God would have "ordained that men must be saved in such a way that only a small minority can in fact receive this salvation." Hick argued that it was God, and not Christianity or Christ, toward whom all religions move, and from whom they gain their salvific efficacy. Hick therefore proposed a theocentric revolution away from a Christocentric or ecclesiocentric position that has dominated Christian history. But what then of Christ? Hick argued that the doctrine of the incarnation should be understood mythically – as an expression of devotion and commitment by Christians, not as an ontological claim that here in this particular place and in this particular man God has chosen to reveal himself uniquely and definitively, in what was later called the "God-man": Jesus Christ. Hick stressed the doctrine of an all-loving God over that of the solus Christus principle.

An important later development in Hick's position came in response to the criticism that his theological revolution was still theocentric and thereby excluded non-theistic religions. Pluralist positions, typically, must account for problems such as this if their claims are to be taken seriously. Hick developed a Kantian-type distinction between a divine noumenal reality "that exists independently and outside man's perception of it" which he calls the "Eternal One," and the phenomenal world, "which is that world as it appears to our human consciousness," in effect the various
human responses to the Eternal One. These responses are then seen as both theistic and non-theistic (e.g., God or Allah, and Nirvana or Nirguna Brahman). In this way Hick tries to overcome any underlying theistic essentialism.

The above arguments cumulatively suggest that Christians can fruitfully view the history of religions as a history of the Eternal One’s (God’s) activity without making any special claims for Christianity. Christian attitudes to other religions need not be characterized by a desire to convert, or claims to superiority, but a will to learn and grow together toward the truth. Mission should be jointly carried out to the secular world by the religions, rather than towards each other. Hick suggests that exclusivism and inclusivism cannot provide such fruitful conditions for interreligious dialogue.

Hick’s philosophical approach to religious pluralism could be contrasted with the very pragmatic approach taken by those deeply influenced by liberation theology, such as Paul Knitter or the Asian Roman Catholic theologian, Aloisius Piens. Piens emphasizes the overcoming of the theocentric, Christocentric and ecclesiocentric problems that bedevil this debate by emphasizing the liberative power of religion as the only criteria for authenticity. In this respect, he finds that Buddhist monasticism (with its voluntary, rather than imposed poverty) and its commitment to the cessation of suffering through gnosis allows “an engagement in a positive and practical programme of psychic social restructuring of human existence here on earth in accordance with the path leading to nirvanic freedom.” Hence, the religions must work together in this common cause and Piens renounces claims for Christianity’s uniqueness and his own Church’s fulfillment theology as forms of Western imperialism.

Exclusivism

Some argue that the rape of cultures and civilizations has often been justified in the name of Christianity armed with an exclusivist missionary theology. Furthermore, racism and colonial imperialism are often closely identified with Christian mission. This chequered history cannot be denied, although it is a complex and ambiguous one. Hence, we should note the persuasive arguments that much missionary work was not in fact pursued in tandem with empire-building, but actually resisted it. Others have defended the rich cultural contributions made by missionaries in terms of the issue of “translation” and criticized the “western guilt complex” in relation to mission work.

I have highlighted these issues to show the ways in which theological attitudes are so closely related to practice. Nevertheless, there are serious theological issues underlying exclusivism. No major systematic theologian holds a rigorist exclusivism, so in this part I will outline a position without close reference to a single named theologian. The exclusivist position (most often found in Lutheran and Calvinist circles) is fundamentally concerned to affirm two central insights. The first is that God has sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to bring salvation into the world and that this salvation is both judgment and mercy to all human beings who are deeply estranged from God. Salvation therefore comes from faith in Christ, and in this alone – salus
il Chirurgia is a learned form of life that adheres to the以上 terminology, and a careful examination of the concepts that underlie these terms is necessary for a full understanding of the first two sections of the book. On the other hand, the second section, which is concerned with the third section, provides a more detailed analysis of the concepts discussed in the first two sections. The importance of these concepts cannot be underestimated, as they are crucial to an understanding of the nature of the human body and its relation to the environment.

The concepts of life and health are central to the study of medicine, and a careful examination of these concepts is necessary for a full understanding of the concepts presented in the first two sections of the book. On the other hand, the second section, which is concerned with the third section, provides a more detailed analysis of the concepts discussed in the first two sections. The importance of these concepts cannot be underestimated, as they are crucial to an understanding of the nature of the human body and its relation to the environment.
- just as there is no salvation - outside the church. One must, in other words, learn
the language of faith before one can know enough about its message knowingly to
reject it and thus be lost.”26 Lindbeck (and this recalls our earlier comment on
Barth’s breaking of the typologies) in fact holds out on theological grounds a hope
for the salvation of all and suggests a post-mortem confrontation with Christ (thereby
satisfying the fides ex auditu principle) to account for non-Christians.27 A Roman
Catholic pupil of Lindbeck’s, Joseph Di Noia, has given this possibility a developed
formulation in terms of employing the doctrine of purgatory (a process of cleansing
also undergone by the Christian) as a means whereby the non-Christian who has
already responded positively to God in their lives will be purified in anticipation of
the trinitarian beatific vision.28 A third and somewhat novel (some might say heretical)
strategy has been suggested whereby reincarnation is posited to solve the problem
of the invincibly ignorant who will therefore have a chance to hear the gospel at
least once before they “properly” die.29

It is clear then, that the boundary lines between these latter forms of exclusivism
and some forms of inclusivism are thin and grey. So it is to inclusivism that we now
turn.

Inclusivism

Inclusivism has a lineage in the Christian tradition, in so much as grace has been
acknowledged to operate outside the confines of the visible church. Quite a number
of Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants share this approach with varying
differences. The main differences revolve around the question as to whether non-
Christian religions can be said to have salvific structures;30 and whether, finally, a
person can come to salvation apart from explicitly confessing Christ. In respect to
the latter point, there is a very unclear line between inclusivists and exclusivists.
Inclusivists tend to be united on the main point that whenever and wherever non-
Christians respond to grace, this grace is the grace of the triune God. In this respect,
inclusivism has often been related to theologics of fulfillment, drawing on the
ancient tradition of a preparatio evangelica.

Karl Rahner’s inclusivism

Karl Rahner, a German Jesuit, is probably the most influential inclusivist theologian
of the twentieth century. Rahner’s theological anthropology shapes his brand of
inclusivism, although he argues his case from Catholic doctrine. Rahner argues that
the precondition of finite (categorical) knowledge is an unconditional openness to
being (Vorgriff), which is an unthematic, prereflective awareness of God – who is
infinite being. Our transcendentlal openness to being constitutes both the hiddenness
of grace and its prethematic presence at the heart of our existence. Men and women
therefore search in history for a categorial disclosure of this hidden grace. In Jesus’
total abandonment to God, his total “Yes” through his life, death, and resurrection,
he is established as the culmination and prime mediator of grace. Therefore Christian
Theology of Religion:

revelation is the explicit expression of grace which men and women experience implicitly in the depths of their being when, for example, they reach out through the power of grace in trusting love and self-sacrifice, or in acts of hope and charity.

Rahner (1966) attempts to balance the *solus Christus* principle with the doctrine of the *universal salvific will of God*, so as to maintain that Christ is the sole cause of salvation in the world, but that this salvific grace may be mediated within history without an explicit confrontation with Christ. Such is the case in the history of Israel which Rahner calls a “lawful religion” prior to the time of Christ. Rahner maintains it remains a lawful religion for those who have never been confronted historically and existentially with the gospel. By this he means that, although a person might hear the gospel being preached historically (say by a person whose life is dissolute and dishonest) that person may not have existentially been addressed for all sorts of reasons (the difficulty of making sense of this message in terms of the medium of presentation — and so on). Hence, this person cannot really count as having “heard” the gospel and rejected it. To return to the argument: If Israel in a certain context had a “lawful religion,” may it not in principle be the case with other religions of the world?

Rahner argues that if salvific grace exists outside the visible Church, as he believes it does in the history of Israel, and in creation and through conscience, then this grace is both causally related to Christ (always and everywhere — as prime mediator) and his Church. Rahner argues that christology and the doctrine of God cannot be separated from the Church as Christ is historically mediated through the Church. This means that Rahner must reconcile membership of the Church as a means of salvation and the possibility that salvific grace is mediated outside the historically tangible borders of the Church. He does this along the lines of the traditional Catholic teachings regarding the *votum ecclesiae* (a wish to belong to the Church), and the related notion of implicit desire. (See the beginnings of Rahner’s thought on this matter in relation to Pius XII’s *Mystici Corporis Christi*.) Furthermore, given the sociohistorical nature of men and women, grace must be mediated historically and socially. The incarnation is paradigmatic of this. Hence, if and when non-Christians respond to grace, then this grace must be mediated through the non-Christian’s religion, however imperfectly. Hence, non-Christian religions may be “lawful religions” with the same qualifications registered regarding Israel. Rahner thus coins the term “anonymous Christian” (this refers to the source of saving grace that is responded to by Christ), and “anonymous Christianity” (this refers to its dynamic orientation toward its definitive historical and social expression in the Church).

Because God has already been active within the non-Christian religions, the Christian can be open to learning about God through her non-Christian partner. Furthermore, the Christian is also free to engage in active social and political cooperation when appropriate. Hence, the inclusivist has a firm theological basis for fruitful dialogue. Given Rahner’s notion that grace must seek to objectivize itself, mission is clearly important. Hence, Rahner is able to affirm that Christianity is the one true religion, while at the same time holding that other religions may have a provisional salvific status.
The debate

Objections to pluralism

There have been a number of objections specifically to Hick's thesis, some of which indicate more general problems with pluralism. First, there are objections to the way in which the centrality of Christ seems to be bypassed. It is argued that Hick's initial theocentric revolution is based on a shaky premise. He rejects the solus Christus for he thinks it leads to the a priori damnation of non-Christians. We have seen above that it need not. Furthermore, when Hick proposes to emphasize God rather than Christ, he is in danger of severing christology from ontology and introducing a free-floating God divorced from any particular revelation. In fact Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have all tended to center on revelatory paradigms for their discourse and practice. Hick's theocentricism pays little attention to the importance of historical particularity and the grounding of theistic discourse. In fact, the theological basis of his proposal (that of an all-loving God) is undermined if Hick cannot give normative ontological status to the revelatory event upon which this axiom is grounded—originally for Hick, that of the revelation of God in Christ. And even if he responds, as he has done, that "an all-loving God" is to be found in Judaism and Islam, it is certainly problematic to base this claim in Buddhism or Confucianism.

A related objection follows from Hick's response to precisely this seeming prioritization of theism. Critics maintain that if the meaning of "God" lacked specificity in Hick's theocentricism, it seems further relativized in his more recent works as the personal, loving, creator "God" is seen as one aspect of the "Eternal One" that apparently can also be characterized by non-personal, non-creator, non-theistic predicates. As all such predicates are from the human side, Hick argues, they are thereby not properly applicable to the Eternal One in any literal way. Hence, replies the critic, "God" cannot be said to be personal or loving in any proper ontological sense. The Kantian noumenon encountered a similar problem in not providing for a correspondence between phenomena and things-in-themselves. Hick seems to be close to a transcendental agnosticism (i.e., affirming a transcendence without any qualities). Despite Hick's stress on soteriocentricism in a liberated lifestyle, can he properly address the question of the nature of God (or the Eternal One) who actually saves and liberates people, or is his doctrine of "God" in danger of avoiding all particularities so as to accommodate every particularity? Again, Hick's response is on the lines that we can never properly describe the Eternal One "in himself," only in "relation to us." Clearly, the outcome of these debates remains unresolved, but highlights the theological centrality of christology and the doctrine of God in the discussion about other faiths.

Pieris's attempt to bypass problems of Christocentricism, theocentricism, and ecclesiocentricism is admirably motivated by a desire for justice and righteousness in Asian society—and not least, peace between the Asian religions. However, critics have argued that Pieris cannot really address the question of liberation without the categories of Christ, God, and the church. It is precisely in Christ and the trinitarian revelation therein that the decisive meaning of liberation is to be found. The further Pieris tries to get away from such specification the closer he gets to another but
Theology of Religions

An unstated set of assumptions. From where does he derive the meaning of "liberation"? Why should such a meaning be privileged and exalted above all religions and used as a judge of them? Is this not a new form of imperialism? Fundamental to this debate is the understanding of action. The critique cited derives from the argument that all action is always employed within a narrative form which both shapes and informs it, so that one cannot simply parallel similar actions (feeding the poor) as if they did not occupy different narrative spaces. Stanley Hauerwas raises this pointed criticism at Gutierrez's liberation theology.30 Clearly, within this political perspective, one can see a similar role for a type of feminist theology of religions which focuses specifically on the question of the liberation of women within the world religions.31

The debate will clearly continue and one can see the complex interrelations of a number of issues.

Objections to exclusivism

The type of exclusivism I outlined faces a number of difficulties. Hick has criticized this position for being incompatible with the God of love disclosed at the heart of Christianity. Quoting the statement of the Congress on World Mission (see above), Hick argues that such an outcome is theologically unacceptable, especially when one considers the invincibly ignorant.32 There are two important points in the exclusivist response. First, for some exclusivists Hick presumes too much in questioning the ways of God as being unjust! Rather, given human sinfulness, we should start from being amazed that God saves anyone at all. The issue at stake here concerns human nature. Secondly, a number of exclusivists have taken seriously the problem of the person who through no fault of his or her own has never heard the gospel. And these developments have been outlined above.

Another criticism aimed at exclusivists is that grace, within the Christian tradition, is not limited purely to an explicit confrontation with Christ.33 This contention is based on a number of arguments. In traditional Christian theology, Judaism up to the time of Christ was certainly accorded revelatory status. Hence, a Christian exclusivist who denied any revelation outside Christ would be hard-pressed to explain the use of the Old Testament as part of Christian scripture. Besides the history of Israel testifying to salvific grace outside the particular event of the historical Jesus, there are also a number of passages within the New Testament that highlight the importance of light-living. If, for instance, a person's courageous self-sacrificing love is due to certain demands within their religion, can these acts of responding to grace be divorced from the mediators of such grace? Or, can the humanist's self-sacrificial love for another, so powerfully portrayed in Camus's The Plague, have nothing to do with Jesus' implied teaching that "as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40)?

The exclusivist may respond in a number of ways. First, pointing out that the revelation Israel received was always directed toward Christ and was no properly salvific in itself, except by virtue of its teleological completion in Christ. Hence, the real question here is whether implicit faith in Christ is alone sufficient for salvation, or whether it requires at some stage explicit faith. It is interesting to note that the major inclusivist theologian, Rahner, also held in his earlier writings on death that
a post-mortem meeting with Christ was essential for the completion of our lives and in preparation for the beatific vision. \(^{40}\) Furthermore, if salvific grace is available through creation and history, apart from explicit faith, does this not call into question the necessity of Jesus Christ for salvation? Exclusivists might also respond that any resort to arguments from virtuous actions is to depart from the sola fide principle, and concede to Pelagianism. Clearly, the arguments will rage on, but again we find the central questions revolving around christology, God, practice, human nature, and the church.

*Objections to inclusivism*

Rahner is criticized by both pluralists and exclusivists. Pluralists argue that the term "anonymous Christian" is deeply offensive to non-Christians and creates a stalemate in dialogue with each side calling the other names (anonymous Hindus, anonymous Muslims, and so on). \(^{35}\) Hans Küng has accused Rahner of creating a terminological distinction to sweep a resistant non-Christian humanity into the Christian church through the back door. \(^{36}\) Rahner has made it very clear that his theory is for internal Christian consumption only, i.e., it is a question within dogmatic theology and not a reflection meant for interfaith dialogue. He is simply reflecting on the possibility that the non-Christian may already have encountered God and, if this is so, then "God" must be the same God as disclosed by Christ. Of course, pluralists respond that this is still an imperialist assertion, always claiming to know more about God than anyone else, and it also sees others purely in terms of their reflection of Christianity. \(^{37}\) Pluralists also criticize the way in which Rahner wants to secure all grace as christologically mediated when he in fact acknowledges that it is mediated within other religions where Christ is not known. This, they want to argue, amounts to a verbal ownership of God, which practically acknowledges the opposite. Rahner would no doubt respond that his argument is one regarding ontological causality, not particular historical mediation.

Rahner also faces severe criticism from those who oppose pluralism and see in his theology certain pluralist tendencies. For instance, it is argued that Rahner compromises the *sola Christus* principle in a fundamental manner. Salvation is made possible without surrender to Christ and this inevitably renders Christ unnecessary in the economy of salvation. \(^{38}\) If salvation requires no explicit faith at all then this dangerously obscures the way in which the church claims to form and nourish genuine faith within a historical-social community. From his cultural-linguistic approach, Lindbeck accuses Rahner of operating with a very defective view of the relationship between experience and interpretation. Put crudely, experience is seen as prior to all interpretation, which leads to what Lindbeck calls “experiential expressivism”; the notion that expression must follow experience. This is contrasted with the cultural-linguistic model, which argues that experience is in large part shaped by the interpretative tradition of the experiencer. Hence, in Rahner’s view Christianity is thereby seen as just a better interpretation of the same experience of grace in different religions. But surely Christian faith is more than this? It is the being shaped in a specific Christoformic fashion by involvement within the specific community of the church. Hence, the question posed to Rahner: What would the
Theology of Religions

difference be between an anonymous and an explicit Christian in terms of faith? Rahner’s invisible Church, it is claimed, is unbiblical and also detracts from the importance of explicit confession as a criterion for membership. The very foundations of Rahner’s theology which undergird his theology of the anonymous Christian have also been called into question by his Roman Catholic colleague, Hans Urs von Balthasar, who has seen in Rahner’s transcendent anthropology the danger of the conflation of nature and grace and the reduction of revelation to a predetermined anthropological system. Balthasar is concerned that, by viewing supernatural grace as being part of the very nature of men and women, Rahner minimizes both the transforming power of the glory of the Lord that shines forth in Christ and the character of sin and of tragedy, which also explains Rahner’s impoverished theology of the cross.

Rahner has responded to these criticisms and I cannot follow the complex debate here, except to briefly say that he has maintained against his more conservative critics that there is no compromise on the basic tenet (shared with exclusivists) that salvation comes exclusively through faith in Christ; and that Christ’s life, death, and resurrection have ontologically (not chronologically) brought salvation irrevocably into the world. Rahner claims he is simply offering one explanation of a teaching maintained by the church that salvation is available to invincibly ignorant non-Christians and he is not unconditionally theologically endorsing the value of non-Christian religions per se.

Objections to the threefold typology

There are some who have either claimed a fourth option or there are those who are unhappy with this threefold classification altogether (and therefore, also with any fourth option). Regarding those who propose a fourth option, Di Noia restricts the definition of exclusivism to stipulating that only those who explicitly confess Christ in this life will be saved. Hence, his purgatorial option allegedly constitutes a fourth option. In Ogden’s case his fourth option rests on the distinction that pluralists claim that other religions are salvific means, while he wishes to claim that they may be salvific means. Ogden claims this to be a new fourth option between inclusivism and pluralism, but it perhaps unquestionably presumes that all pluralists are committed to an a priori affirmation of other religions as salvific means.

Challenges to the whole enterprise have been put forward most forcefully by Kenneth Surin and John Mulbank, both primarily reacting against pluralism but finding problems with the entire project. Surin’s criticism is essentially political and genealogical (deriving from Michel Foucault), suggesting that rather than serve up theories about religious unity in an abstract, ahistorical, and apolitical fashion, real attention should be paid to the social, political, and power relationships between religions in their particular locality. Theological talk has usually served to obscure rather than identify the real terrain in which the exercise of power in the materialist order is the key to understanding the superstructure where legitimating theologizing is produced. Hence, pluralist theologies perpetuate the existing status quo by distracting attention away from the real problems. While Surin’s criticisms are powerful and incisive, there is a danger that he redescribes the territory so radically that
there are no valid theological questions left. While this materialist reductionism is
insightful, ultimately it surrenders theology entirely into the hands of social and
political theorists, reducing all theological discourse to genealogical origins.

Milbank, while sharing much in common with Surin, proposes quite a different
role for theology. Milbank is deeply suspicious of the notion of “religion,” as well
as the belief that dialogue provides a privileged access to truth. Rather he urges that
Christianity must simply proclaim its vision through its particular form of practice
within the church. The church can do no other than this, nor ought it to try. What
both Surin and Milbank do so clearly is alert us to the fact that all theology is also
tied up within a political and social nexus. We will return to this point later.

Finally, I must declare certain reservations with the threefold paradigm, despite
my having employed it heuristically in this chapter. We have already seen the thin
dividing lines between strong forms of inclusivism and weak forms of exclusivism,
and likewise with weak forms of inclusivism and certain forms of pluralism. The
typology is constantly inadequate. Furthermore, typologies can easily harden into
Procrustean beds, forcing diverse materials into easily controlled locations. All this
should keep us on our guard. But most seriously, it might be the case that in using
the depictions (pluralism, inclusivism, and exclusivism) we disguise the fact that
what we are really dealing with are different forms of exclusivism! Pluralism often
claims the high ground in being more tolerant, more liberal, more affirmative of
truth in other religions, etc. This typology rhetorically reaffirms this false self-
description. Pluralism, as I have argued elsewhere, has its own intolerant, illiberal
shadow-side, for if it is to be effective at all, then it must operate with criteria to
discern truth, “God,” and salvation. And in so doing, it will naturally exclude all
that is not in keeping with these criteria. So in this respect, it is no different from
exclusivism. The difficult criteriological questions that underlie this debate are there-
fore not always highlighted via this typology, although, as has been seen above, it
is the choice and use of such criteria that dictate the differences within this schema.

Achievement and Agenda

The achievement of the modern debate is that the question of other religions is here
to stay with Christian theology into the twenty-first century. This can be regarded
as an achievement in the sense that the credibility of Christianity will partly depend
on the way in which it can respond to the bewildering plurality that characterizes
the modern world. This works in at least two ways. If Christianity is not able to see
itself as distinct and unique in any sense at all it will probably be assimilated and
absorbed by traditions that do feel they have a special vision for the world. People
are not particularly interested and challenged by nothing at all! On the other hand,
if Christian theology denigrates the rich heritage of millions of women and men it
will fail to respect the goodness of creation affirmed within its own creed and
foolishly turn its back on the many riches and glories found within other religions.
By facing up to the difficult theological issues raised by the presence of other
religions, one can only hope that various churches will be able to deal more con-
structively with the complex reality facing them.
Theology of Religions

The modern debate has raised an agenda, which will expand and be reshaped as time progresses, ranging from questions regarding the nature of religion, the socio-political context of religious encounters, the person of Jesus Christ, the nature of God, the character of the church and its mission. It would be fair to say that at the heart of the matter lies the question: “Who do you say that I am?” The way in which Christians relate to other religions is deeply shaped by the way in which they relate to Jesus Christ, thereby showing that the future agenda is both intra-Christian and extra-Christian. By intra-Christian I mean that the various developments in theology will substantially affect the question of other religions. This relates both to questions of method and theological content. For example, within “liberal” Christian circles, especially where there is a strong emphasis on “God” and sociopolitical liberation, we are likely to find a certain pattern in responding to other religions which is predictable prior to interreligious encounter. On the other hand, theologies that are strongly Christocentric, utilizing categories such as story or narrative, are more likely to emphasize the particularity of the Christian message and its power to shape people in terms of a specific narrative. Such theologies are likely to be more suspicious of liberal approaches, although they will not necessarily result in negative assessments of other religions. Furthermore, the recent recovery of trinitarian theologies is also likely to give the debate a new injection of life, for it gives a richness to christology that is often neglected. We have seen to some extent the way in which liberation theology has affected the debate, and in the future feminist, ecological, postmodern, Asian, Latin American, African, and many other types of theology will all bring their own distinctive insights to bear more fully on the matters of christology, God, the church, and other religions. It is difficult to predict the outcome of such theologies but it is also difficult to see how Christ, God, and the church can be bypassed in any serious attempt to grapple theologically with the question of other religions.

By extra-Christian I want to register an issue, among many others, that could not be dealt with in such a short space. We have had no time to deal with the dynamics of specific encounters where the theology of religions may take on all sorts of encounter-specific characteristics. For example, in the Jewish–Christian dialogue, the antisemitism within traditional christology comes to the fore in a most painful and disturbing manner; as well as the nature of God’s promises regarding his “covenant.” Also, and less aired, is the question regarding Messianic Jews and Hebrew Christians, who have often been shunned and rejected by both Jews and Christians. Clearly, the issues in this latter arena are quite different to ones raised when Christianity encounters a profoundly non-theistic tradition like Buddhism, where it has not had the same fraternal relationship, although here the context of colonialism is deeply relevant and often painful. Hence, the debates with Buddhism have ranged over very different issues such as the relation of apophatic theology to the apparent non-theism of Buddhism; the meditative techniques within Buddhism that bring about a freedom to act in charity and love; and the question of the portrayal of Buddhism in the West, for example, the Victorian construction of Buddhism. Hence, extra-Christian presence in the debate is likely to create all sorts of unforeseen developments. Furthermore, these specific encounters also raise the question of the relationship between a theology of religions and a theology arising
out of specific encounters. Some argue that the latter should have priority over the former, and some would go further to suggest that the latter even invalidates the exercise of the former altogether.

We have also not touched on the question of inculturation which is closely linked with our theme, as the culture of so many churches, especially in Asia and Africa, is formed by various non-Christian religions. Hence, as we saw with Pieris above, the question of a truly Asian church may call for an entirely different attitude to Buddhism and Hinduism than has been traditional in Western theologies. There are already churches in Asia where readings from the sacred scriptures of the Hindus such as the Bhagavad Gita or Upanishads are incorporated into the liturgy (usually prior to the Old Testament and sometimes instead of the Old Testament — thereby reflecting a fulfillment theology of inclusivism). And in such churches one can often find a liturgy and lifestyle which Western Christians may find hard to recognize due to its deeply Indian roots. There are also individuals such as Brahmatandhab Upadhyay who considered themselves Hindu-Christians, which raises all sorts of new and interesting questions. When I mentioned that the different developments in theology are likely to shape the way this question is approached, it is clear that theologians from churches often faced with this dramatic religious plurality are likely to be the main practitioners of future theology of religions. There are also issues of the relationship of theology of religions to systematic theology and the study of religions within the church and within the academy. While some see this area as integral to systematic theology with institutional repercussions, others have argued for a more ambitious nondenominational global or world theology which has radical and far-reaching implications.

This whole issue raises the question which has remained implicit throughout this exploration: Will our theological method significantly determine our answer to the question concerning other religions? Might it be the case that a theology of religions must ultimately pay as much attention to the “Other” as well as the manner in which we deal with the gracious and holy “Other” who is made known in Father, Son, and Spirit?

Notes


8 Ibid., pp. 165–79.


16 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh, 1970), vol. IV.1, p. 60.


33 G. D’Costa, Theology and Religious Pluralism, pp. 52–79.


37 G. D’Costa, Christianity and Distorted Visions of World Religions (Birmingham, 1995).


41 S. Ogden, Is there only One True Religion or are there Many? (Dallas, TX, 1992); J. A. Di Noia, The Diversity of Religions.


Theology of Religions

Bibliography

— John Hick’s Theology of Religions: A critical evaluation (Lanham, MD, 1987).
— Christianity and Distorted Visions of World Religions (Birmingham, 1995).
— An Interpretation of Religion (Basingstoke, 1988).
Käsemann, E., Christianity among the World Religions: Concilium (Edinburgh, 1986).
Ogden, S., Is there only one True Religion or are there Many? (Dallas, TX, 1992).
— Black Hags for the Pope (Robert Cruz citing Pietsch), The Tablet, 14 January 1988, pp. 36-7.
Rahner, Karl, Theological Investigations (London, 1963-80), vol 1, 5, 6, 12, 14, 16-17.
Theology of Religions


---