

The Challenge of Other Religions: From the Problematic to the Possible

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It is perhaps of some comfort to know our topic has always been seen as a challenge. I came across a reference recently in Kenneth Cragg's latest book about a 16th century Dominican, with whom I felt immediate sympathy. "Among reformed secretaries in the West, often ignored by historians, there were," writes Cragg, "intriguing ventures into the puzzle of competing faiths. In central Europe and the Balkans ... thinkers such as Jacob Paleologus (c 1530-1585) ... took their revolt against ecclesial rule into overtures of mind toward Islam. Moved by the providential problem of its domain in Europe but also probing into its potentially mutual ground with Christianity ... Paleologus returned to Europe to pursue his vision of 'an inter-faith church of spiritual semites' in which he conceived of Jews, Gentile Christians and Turks as 'three branches of the people of God,' insofar as they conformed to 'the inner world'. He saw the first as being such by race, the second by faith, and the third by their monotheism, their occupancy of Christian lands, and their acknowledgment of 'the prophet's office of Christ'. These were, indeed, radical ideas in the context of that time—ideas for which Paleologus, as a discredited Dominican, paid with his life, suffering execution in Rome."¹

Many more people than Paleologus are struggling with this challenge today, but unlike him the only penalty we suffer is a headache

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¹ Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian, A History in the Middle East* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991) p. 131.

wading through the theological flood of books and articles on the problems, paradigms and possibles in a theology of religions. This article is no more than an introductory survey, a map of my toe-dipping into the literature, but it might help us hold hands lest we get swept away by the waters. My own reading over the years suggests that a good way of dividing the topic is to look into the problem, the paradigm, some new paradigms, and finally possibilities and issues.

The Problem

In the second century, Justin Martyr wrote, "No one can give a name to God, who is too great for words; if anyone dares to say that it is possible to do so, that person must be suffering from an incurable madness." Perhaps the greatest problem is in our confusing faith with certainty, and in our desire to come up with a word for the un-nameable. No wonder we get headaches!

A plurality of religions can be a problem if it is a divisive force used to mark group identities. A religious fundamentalism can lead to intolerance of other groups, and activists can easily harness religious identity and emotion for political ends. But these are not theological problems as such. It becomes a theological problem when one seeks to move away from such exclusiveness and to give some legitimacy to other religions as religions.

The fundamental issue facing Christian theologians arises from a monistic view of "salvation" and what is called "the uniqueness of Christ." While this is a problem, there is something cautious and good about theologians and spokesmen who refuse "to be rushed into novel formulations which would not do justice to all the factors that need to be taken into account."²

This is a good sign because we not only lack a language in which to express the experience; as yet we do not have the idiom or the grammar — perhaps not even the alphabet — that we need. Every day new horizons are being disclosed in bio-ethics, chaos mathematics,³ ecology, space research, and in the *Quantum Theory* (described not only by the Principle of Indeterminism, but by physicists' desire for a *Grand Unification Theory* [GUT], and even a *Theory of Everything* [TOE]).

² Donald Nicholl, "Wrestling with truth," in *The Tablet*, 9 October 1993.

These throw into quite different light everything in the past as well as in the present. Any attempt now to produce a cut-and dried formula about the "uniqueness of Christ" would abort inter-faith experience and close off the widening horizons. (Charles Journet, the Swiss theologian, once described the aim of the theologian dealing with a mystery as "doing away with phrases which would diminish the mystery"). The problem lies in our beginning where we are: our own faith tradition. There is, of course, no other place to begin. The problem arises when we do not see this faith tradition precisely as a beginning, a take-off-point.

Another problem arises from mere facts: Christians in Asia are about 2% of the total population. No one, unless unbelievably arrogant, would say that God is present and at work in only 2% of those whom he created and whom he loves.

Out of the many attempts to deal with these problems, there has emerged what is now a fairly familiar paradigm.

The Paradigm

It is John Hick who judges, "the simplest and least misleading classification is the now fairly standard threefold division into exclusivism (salvation is confined to Christianity), inclusivism (salvation occurs throughout the world but is always the work of Christ), and pluralism (the great world faiths are different and independently authentic contexts of salvation/liberation)."⁴ Although this has become now "fairly standard," it is not without its critics. One of these is Ian Markham, who in a recent article formulates what he calls "one option which cannot be embraced by the traditional paradigm."⁵

³ Perhaps the most famous formulation of chaos mathematics is that of James Gleick: "A butterfly stirring the air today in Beijing can transform storm systems next month in New York."

⁴ John Hick, Review of Glyn Richard's, "Towards a Theology of Religions," in *Religious Studies*, Vol. 26 (1990), p. 175. Others who have emphasized the traditional paradigm include: Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1983); and also Paul Knitter, *No Other Name, A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*, (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1985).

⁵ Cf. "Creating Options: Shattering the Exclusivist, Inclusivist and Pluralist Paradigm," in *New Blackfriars*, (January 1993), pp. 33-41.

Markham sees the underlying problem with this threefold classification resulting from what he describes as the conflation of three matters: (1) The conditions for salvation; (2) Whether the major world religions are all worshipping the same God; (3) The truth about the human situation.

He argues that the traditional paradigm emphasizes the first, is confused about the second, and with regard to the third links truth questions with soteriology.

An exclusivist position, on which the debate concentrates, implies that salvation depends either on the primacy of belief in the incarnation, or experience of Jesus as saviour. Markham would stress rather the importance of actions, having difficulty with an emphasis on beliefs as elitist, as culturally conditioned, and thinks that most people find beliefs less important than actions. He has his problems with experience, which also appears to him elitist (some people may have a religious sensitivity without the religious experience). It would, in his eyes be unjust to make salvation dependent on experience, which is also culturally conditioned in terms of the religious framework of one's own culture. The alternative he proposes is to emphasize action, or "orthopraxis over orthodoxy," and he defines salvation as "a turn from self-centeredness to other-centredness. The realization of love and compassion in your life is the act of being saved; it is the cultivation of a loving attitude expressed in actions. It is a disposition of openness to others."⁶

Another example is found in a review article by Paul J. Griffiths of a recent book.⁷ Griffiths reminds us that the theology of religions has an *a priori* and an *a posteriori* part. The former is concerned with what can be said theologically about the facts of religious pluralism. The only knowledge about the world's communities required for this is the bare fact that they exist. The latter, by contrast, deals with specific empirically available knowledge about actual religious communities. It is obvious that most theorizing about non-Christian communities has so far been *a priori*, and its conclusions phrased in the indicative mood. Crudely: exclusivism (Christianity is the only true religion),

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Schubert M. Ogden, *Is There Only True Religion Or Are There Many?* (Dallas: SMU Press, 1992), cited in Paul J. Griffiths, "Modalizing the Theology of Religions," *Journal of Religions*, Vol. 73 (1993), pp. 382-389.

inclusivism (the truth of all religions is included in Christianity), and pluralism (all religions are true). A posteriori theorizing would include an examination of the historical particularities of a religion, requiring linguistic, anthropological, sociological, hermeneutic and other skills (as pointed out by Gavin D'Costa in his reply to Markham). It seems also obvious that there are few Christian theologians with the knowledge or interest to undertake an a posteriori theology of some specific non-Christian community.⁸

What is interesting in the article is the realization that even in an a priori theology of religions, claims can be "modalized," or (in the logical sense) recast in terms of possibilities and necessity. Thus from the indicative Christianity *is* the only true religion, we can move to something like, it is *possible* that there is more than one true religion, and the like. There is, in other words, more than exclusive and inclusive, more than a "religious monism," that says, in the end, there is but one religion. There is also more than pluralism, which holds that there are many formally true religions, i.e. salvific in the Christian sense. It is possible to assert the modal claim that there could be many true religions: that this is a possibility but not an established fact known a priori. This alternative paradigm is described as pluralistic inclusivism.⁹

New Paradigms

Besides these attempts to formulate alternative paradigms, whether one of "other-centered action" or of "pluralist inclusivism"—neither of which really succeed in breaking away from the assumptions of the traditional paradigm—Aloysius Pieris in Sri Lanka writes that he has found himself "appropriating a trend in Asia, which adopts

⁸ Such an ideal is proposed, e.g., by John S. Dunne in *The Way of All The Earth, Experiments in Truth and Religion* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1972): "the holy man of our time...is not a figure like Gotama or Jesus or Muhammad, a man who could found a world religion, but a figure like Gandhi, a man who passes over by sympathetic understanding from his own religion to other religions and comes back again with new insight to his own. Passing over and coming back, it seems, is the spiritual adventure of our time" (p. ix). One person on this journey, it seems to me, is Aloysius Pieris, the Sri Lankan Jesuit. Cf *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988) and numerous articles, e.g., "Does Christ Have a Place in Asia? A Panoramic View," *Concilium*, 1993,2, pp. 33-47, and "An Asian paradigm: Inter-religious dialogue and theology of religions," *The Month*, (April 1993), pp. 129-134.

⁹ Cf Paul J. Griffiths, "Modalizing the Theology of Religions," p. 382.

a paradigm wherein the three (traditional) categories ... do not make sense." He describes this in terms of "three overlapping concerns which do not receive any emphasis in the western approach." The first is the acknowledgment of what he calls a "third magisterium" of the poor; the second is the liberation thrust defining an Asian theology of religions; and thirdly, he locates this theology in the "basic human communities."¹⁰

This paradigm is new in that it does not take the uniqueness of Christ as its starting point, but originates from among the poor who constitute a school where Christians, especially those in basic human communities, re-educate themselves. Christians and adherents of other religions learn to re-interpret their beliefs. It is thus, says Pieris, that each participant through the mediation of the mostly non-Christian poor, in the on-going liberative praxis of the basic human community, discovers the uniqueness of his/her religion, which for Christians lies in the fact that in the Jesus they follow God who has made a "defense pact" with the poor.¹¹

Possibilities and Issues

Having spent a lifetime trying to understand it, physicist Niels Bohr found that "the opposite of one profound truth may well be another profound truth." There is something adventurous about this theological journey on the frontiers. It challenges Christians to a new self-understanding posed by this confrontation with the other great world religions. Interreligious dialogue, as David Tracy observes is "a crucial issue which will transform all Christian theology in the long run... We are fast approaching the day when it will not be possible to attempt a Christian systematic theology except in serious conversation with other great ways."¹² Tracy is one of those who realizes that even liberal inclusivist ways must be put at risk in the new inter-religious dialogues. In a review of this book. John Hick says Tracy does not consider "the next move that suggests itself - in which the 'centre' is not the God of theism but the transcendent Ultimate that is manifested to different

¹⁰ Aloysius Pieris, "An Asian paradigm," p. 130.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, (Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 1: Louvain Peeters Press, 1990), p. xi.

religious mentalities in different religious mentalities in different ways.”¹³ Whether or not this is a Christian response to the problem is another problem, but Hick’s comment reminds us that the lesson of serious inter-faith dialogue is that we shall have to be willing to go beyond the categories of our own inherited faith if we are to discover God’s purposes. In the words of M.M. Thomas, we shall have to “risk Christ for Christ’s sake.”

Is it possible to go beyond dialogue and radically restate the Christian faith before the presence of the great religions? What is the theological significance of the presence of religions in Asia? Are we not called to a new understanding of God, of Jesus, of church and mission?¹⁴ As one Indian theologian, in speaking of what he describes as the “trans-ecclesial trend,” put it: “If Christianity interprets Asian pluriformity as part of God’s eternal plan, then the method and content of the Church’s mission in Asia requires a new vision.”¹⁵

I have been reading a noted American historian who describes three characteristic ways of thinking and feeling of those who live on the frontier:

a) self-awareness: we notice who are, how we are thinking, what we are doing;

b) an openness to change: when we encounter something different our appetites are whetted for newness:

c) strong community consciousness: in face of the different and unfamiliar, we seek to reassure one another as we organize our new communities and new forms of community.¹⁶

This meeting on the frontiers, open to others, characterized by the “other-centredness,” which Markham speaks about, changes us by giving us a new identity, in the sense in which Emmanuel Levinas speaks: a culture of otherness, of relatedness. A culture each constituent of which, acknowledging its finitude, seeks to recognize and re-

¹³ Cf. John Hick’s review in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 29 (1992), p. 280.

¹⁴ Cf. Rienzie Perera, “Doing Theology in a Religiously Pluralistic Context, *CTC Bulletin* (Hong Kong CCA, 1991).

¹⁵ A.J.V. Chandrakanthan, “Emerging trends in Asian theology,” *Theology Digest* Vol. 39(1992), p. 341.

¹⁶ Daniel J. Boorstin, *Hidden History* (NY: Vintage Books, 1987), p. xvii.

spect as equals those “others” whose very different narratives and perceptions affect and change our own.¹⁷ It is a meeting which changes our way of looking at Jesus, who is now our end-point, in us as “hope” and as “mystery” (Col 1. 27-28) and as promise of completion. Who is himself elusive, never-caught-up-with, but always beckoning us further into the journey, not towards certainty but deeper into mystery, into faith, into hope of completion, and as the one who makes us ready for the new ways of God.

Our community and our mission on the frontier will be a shift from our own agenda to a waiting on God, whose purposes are so much broader than ours, whose reign so much more than the church. A God who, as St. Augustine reminds us, is “always more.”

This inter-faith dialogue on the frontiers is itself a new paradigm. When taken seriously, then some serious issues will demand our attention:

a) The fact that each religion, even the so-called revealed ones, are human attempts to construe and contextualize God’s revelation to humankind.

b) The fact that each religion, and religion in general, perpetuates forms of idolatry which have caused, and continue to cause, immense pain and suffering in our world.

c) The fact that all religions are elaborate symbolic, ritual and theological statements of the human search for meaning.

d) One could argue that the religions, understood in evolutionary terms properly belong to the axial age (c 800-200 BCE) and may have diminished importance for humanity, moving into a new evolutionary epoch.

e) In the past, religion was the chief instrument through which people explored and articulated their spiritual desires and aspirations. Today, however, increasing numbers of people are discovering their spiritual identity in contexts other than those of formal churches or religions.¹⁸

¹⁷ Cf. Nicholas Lash, “In Search of the Prodigal,” *America*, (June 13, 1992), p. 507.

¹⁸ Cf. Diarmuid O’Murchu MSC, “New Paradigms in Theology,” *Focus*, Vol. 11 (1991), p. 164-165.

Conclusion

The conclusion is that there is no conclusion to something that is just beginning. But we can conclude as to some necessary steps. Some of these, I should think, would be to stress what we have in common: the human phenomena of belief. We deal with others who believe, with people who experience God — but it is the experience we all talk about, not God. I think we have to be very careful lest we make the same old mistakes by asking the wrong questions, beginning, e.g., with salvation and Christ's "uniqueness." What unites us all is human solidarity and the commonness of the human experience.

And what should characterize the dialogue most of all is the awareness, as Karl Rahner has written, that "The divinely intended dream of salvation for the individual meets him within the concrete religion of his actual existential milieu and historical contingency, according to God's will and forbearance (which so intermingle that they are no longer clearly separable)."¹⁹

What should characterize participants in the dialogue should be reverence before a God "free of favoritism" (Deut 10:17), and who always makes fiction of the truth we think we have arrived at. A God for whom the Israelites are the same as the Cushites, the Philistines, and the Arameans (Amos 9:7).

The most important issue is what John Harriott (writing not about dialogue but about Thatcherism) called, "a sense of wonder at the grandeur of God, the grandeur of creation, the dignity of the human being. A mentality that thinks it, or the church itself, has God in its pocket, that there is only one ideal social order, one ideal pattern of behaviour, one road to paradise belittles God and is a lie against the richness of creation. The ways in which man understands God, responds to God, worships God, are infinitely subtle and various, as are the ways of human love. Every human life is a mystery ... The passion for order, conformity, discipline, not as occasional crutches for our weakness but as dominant values, sells that richness and subtlety short. We are mysteries, proceeding from mystery and living in the midst of mystery. When we think we have God or our own nature taped, we have," he

¹⁹ Quoted by Eugene Hillman, "Evangelization in a Wider Context," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 12(1975), p. 6.

writes, "abandoned the true pain and excitement of religion and settled for a handier form of social organization."²⁰

In the Gospel of Thomas (18) the followers said to Jesus, "Tell us how our end will be." Jesus said, "Have you discovered the beginning, then, so that you are seeking the end? For where the beginning is, the end will be. Fortunate is one who stands at the beginning: that one will know the end." This is a thought echoed by the poet, Eliot, and it is a thought that gives us hope for our journey on the frontiers:

We shall not cease from exploration
and the end of all exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time.²¹ □

²⁰ *The Tablet*, 10 November 1979.