



Religious Pluralism

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One of the most perceptive analysts of the consequences of pluralism for the Christian churches is Lesslie Newbigin, who is able to draw on his substantial first-hand experience of Christian life in India as he reflects on what pluralism means - and does not mean! - for contemporary Christianity. Commenting on his theme, 'The gospel in a pluralist society', Newbigin remarks:

It has become a commonplace to say that we live in a pluralist society - not merely a society which is in fact plural in the variety of cultures, religions and lifestyles which it embraces, but pluralist in the sense that this plurality is celebrated as things to be approved and cherished.[30]

Newbigin here makes a distinction between pluralism as a fact of life, and pluralism as an ideology - that is, the belief that pluralism is to be encouraged and desired, and that normative claims to truth are to be censured as imperialist and divisive. With the former, there can be no arguing. The Christian proclamation has always taken place in a pluralist world, in competition with rival religious and intellectual convictions.

Ancient Israel was acutely aware that its faith was not shared by its neighbours. The existence of other religions was simply a fact of life for the Israelites. It caused them no great difficulties, in that they believed that theirs happened to be right, where others were wrong. The same pattern emerges in the New Testament. From the first days of its existence, Christianity has recognized the existence of other religions, and the challenge which they posed. Initially, Christianity faced a challenge from Judaism; this rapidly receded, to

be replaced by the challenge of Roman civil religion, various forms of Greek religion of late antiquity, gnosticism, and various pagan mystery cults. The issues raised are nothing new. In recent decades, widespread immigration from the Indian subcontinent to the United Kingdom, from former French colonies in Africa to France, and from the nations of the Asian Pacific Rim to Australia and the eastern seaboard of the United States and Canada, has brought the issue home to modern western society, which had hitherto been shielded from it. Christianity was born amidst religious pluralism; that pluralism has now re-emerged, both as a social reality and a theological issue, in the west. The issues raised by the existence of other religions are considerable, and would merit books in themselves. This section can hope to identify and engage with only some of the more significant ones.

The rise of religious pluralism can directly be related to the collapse of the Enlightenment idea of universal knowledge, rather than any difficulties within Christianity itself. Often, there is a crude attempt to divert attention from the collapse of the Enlightenment vision by implying that religious pluralism represents a new and unanswerable challenge to Christianity itself. The Princeton philosopher Diogenes Allen rightly dismisses this as a spurious claim:

Many have been driven to relativism by the collapse of the Enlightenment's confidence in the power of reason to provide foundations for our truth-claims and to achieve finality in our search for truth in the various disciplines. Much of the distress concerning pluralism and relativism which is voiced today springs from a crisis in the secular mentality of modern western culture, not from a crisis in Christianity itself.[31]

Yet these relativistic preconceptions have become deeply ingrained within secular society, often with the assumption that they are to the detriment of Christian faith.

For the apologist, the central issue is this: given that there are so many religions in the marketplace, how can Christianity claim to be true? Let us note a difficulty here, before proceeding further. The word 'religion' needs further examination. In his classic, but highly problematic,

work *The Golden Bough* (1890), Sir James Frazer made the fundamental point that: 'there is probably no subject in the world about which opinions differ so much as the nature of religion, and to frame a definition of it which would satisfy everyone must obviously be impossible.' Yet, largely on account of the homogenizing tendencies of modern liberalism, there has recently been a determined effort to reduce all religions to the same basic phenomenon.

There is a question of intellectual power here. Who makes the rules which determines what is a religion? The rules of this game determine the outcome: so who decides on them? Underlying much recent western liberal discussion of 'the religions' is a naive assumption that 'religion' is a genus, an agreed category. In fact, it is nothing of the sort. John Milbank, in an important study, makes the point that the 'assumption about a religious genus' is central to

... the more recent mode of encounter as dialogue, but it would be a mistake to imagine that it arose simultaneously among all the participants as the recognition of an evident truth. On the contrary, it is clear that the other religions were taken by Christian thinkers to be species of the genus 'religion', because these thinkers systematically subsumed alien cultural phenomena under categories which comprise western notions of what constitutes religious thought and practice. These false categorizations have often been accepted by western-educated representatives of the other religions themselves, who are unable to resist the politically imbued rhetorical force of western discourse. [32]

We must therefore be suspicious of the naive assumption that 'religion' is a well-defined category, which can be surgically distinguished from 'culture' as a whole.

It is important to appreciate that a cultural issue is often linked in with this debate: it is implied that to defend Christianity is to belittle non-Christian religions, which is unacceptable in a multi-cultural society. Especially to those of liberal political convictions, the multicultural agenda demands that religions should not be permitted to make truth-claims, to avoid the dangers of imperialism and triumphalism. Indeed, there seems to be a wide-spread perception that the rejection of

religious pluralism entails intolerance, or unacceptable claims to exclusivity. In effect, the liberal political agenda dictates that all religions should be treated on an equal footing. It is but a small step from this political judgment to the *theological* declaration that all religions are the same. But is there any reason for progressing from the entirely laudable and acceptable demand that we should respect religions other than our own, to the more radical demand that we regard them all as the same, or as equally valid manifestations of some eternal or 'spiritual' dimension to life?

In its most extreme form, this view results in the claim that all religions lead to God. But this cannot be taken seriously, when some world religions are avowedly non-theistic. A religion can hardly lead to God if it explicitly denies the existence of a god or any gods. We therefore need to restate the question in terms of 'ultimate reality', or 'truth'. Thus refined, this position might be, stated as follows. Religion is often determined by the circumstances of one's birth. An Indian is likely to be a Hindu; an Arab is likely to be a Moslem. On account of this observation, it is argued, all religions must be equal paths to the truth.

This makes truth a function of birth. If I were to be born into Nazi Germany, I would be likely to be a Nazi - and this makes Nazism true? If I had been born in ancient Rome, I would probably have shared its polytheism; if I had been born in modern Arabia, I would be a monotheist. So they are both true? No other intellectual discipline would accept such a superficial approach to truth. Why accept it here? It seems to rest upon an entirely laudable wish to allow that everyone is right, which ends up destroying the notion of truth itself. Consider the two propositions:

- a. Different people have different religious views.
- b. Therefore all religious views are equally valid.

Is proposition (b) in any way implied by proposition (a)? For the form of liberalism committed to this approach, mere existence of a religious idea appears to be a guarantor of its truth! Yet no-one seems prepared to fight for the truth-content of defunct religions, such as classical polytheism - perhaps because there is,

no-one alive committed to them, whose views need to be respected in a multicultural situation?

The fatal weakness of this approach usually leads to its being abandoned, being replaced with a modified version, which could be stated thus: 'Any view which is held with sincerity may be regarded as true'. I might thus be a Nazi, a Satanist, or a passionate believer in the flatness of the earth. My sincerity is a guarantee of the truth. On this view, it would follow that if someone sincerely believes that modern Europe would be a better place if six million Jews were to be placed in gas chambers, the sincerity of those convictions allow that view to be accepted as true. British philosopher of religion John Hick summarizes the absurdity of this view, 'To say that whatever is sincerely believed, and practised is, by definition, true, would be the end of all critical discrimination, both intellectual and moral.' [33]

It is therefore more than a little ironic that the most significant advocate of the pluralist 'truth-in-all-religions' approach is the same John Hick, who argues that the same basic infinite divine reality lies at the experiential roots of all religions. They, however, experience and express this reality in different ways. Why? 'Their differing experiences of that reality, interacting over the centuries with the different thought-forms of different cultures have led to an increasing differentiation and contrasting elaborations.' [34] (A similar outlook is associated with English Deism in the late seventeenth century, which held that there was originally no universal rational religion, which gradually become corrupted into the various religions of the world. There is no historical evidence for this dogmatic assumption.)

This approach thus suggests that the various religions may be understood to complement one another. In other words, truth, does not lie in an 'either-or' but in a 'both-and' approach: differences within religions are, 'Differences in perception, not reality.' This naturally leads to the idea that dialogue between religions can lead to an enhancement of truth, in that the limited perspectives of one religion can be complemented by the different perspectives of another. As all religions are held to relate to the same reality, 'dialogue' thus constitutes a privileged mode of access to truth.

On the basis of Hick's homogenizing approach, no genuine conflicting truth-claims can occur. They are ruled out of order, on *a priori* grounds: by definition, religions can only complement, not contradict, each other. In practice, Hick appears to contradict himself here, frequently declaring that 'exclusive' approaches to religions are wrong. For example, he styles the traditional 'salvation through Christ alone' statements of the 1960 Congress on World Mission as 'ridiculous' - where, by his own criteria, the most stinging criticism that could be directed at them is that they represent a 'difference in perception'. The inherent absurdity of Hick's refusal to take an evaluative position in relation to other religions is compromised by his eagerness to adopt such a position in relation to versions of Christianity which threaten his outlook, both on account of their numerical strength and non-inclusive theologies.

When all is said and done, and when all differences in expression arising from cultural and intellectual development are taken into account, Hick must be challenged forcefully concerning his crudely homogenizing approach to the world religions. It is absurd to say that a religion which says that there is a God complements a religion which declares, with equal vigour, that there is *not* a God (and both types of religion exist). [35] If the religious believer actually believes *something*, then disagreement is inevitable - and proper. As the distinguished American philosopher Richard Rorty remarked, nobody 'except the occasional cooperative freshman' really believes that 'two incompatible opinions on an important topic are equally good.' [36]

Hick has predetermined that there shall not be differences among the religions; and there the matter rests - for him. Where contradiction arises, we are confronted with cases of special pleading, or death by a thousand qualifications, as Hick argues by introducing increasingly implausible subsidiary hypotheses which so qualify his original views as to render them virtually devoid of meaning. Having dogmatically determined that all religions possess the same core structure, Hick ruthlessly forces them into the same mould - a mould which owes nothing to the outlooks of the world's religions, and everything to the liberal cultural agenda which so obviously inspires Hick's theories.

Hick's defence of the homogeneity of all religions often seems to rest upon a refusal to allow that there are decisive differences between religions, even where these obviously exist. For instance, the Hindu practice of *bhakti* cannot be described as (and thus assimilated to) 'worship', when it so clearly relates to a network of ideas centring on the systematic appeasement of potentially ven-geful deities, or seeking favours from them.

Furthermore, the notion of 'truth through dialogue' has merit if, and only if, the dialogue is between parties who are describing the same thing. Dialogue, from its Socratic form onwards, rests upon the assumption that participants share a common recog-nized subject matter, and that certain truths can be agreed con-cerning this subject. Through the process of dialogue, each participant comes to share an increasingly sympathetic under-standing of the viewpoints of others - and by doing so, come to a deeper understanding of the central subject area itself. But it has never been shown that the different world religions share a common subject matter. It has often been asserted that they do; but there is a world of difference between the assertions of those with vested liberal cultural precommitments, and the disinteres-ted comparison of religions.

One of the most serious difficulties which arises here relates to the fact that, on the basis of Hick's model, it is not individual religions which have access to truth; it is the western liberal pluralist, who insists that each religion must be seen in the context of others, before it can be evaluated. As many have pointed out this means that the western liberal doctrine of religious pluralism is defined as the only valid standpoint for evaluating individual religions. Hick has set at the centre of his system of religions vague and undefined idea of 'the Eternal One', which seems to be a little more than a vague liberal idea of divinity, carefully defined or, more accurately, deliberately not defined, to avoid the damage that precision entails - to include at least something from all of the major world religions Hick feels it is worth including.

To develop this important point, let us consider a well-worn analogy concerning the relation of the religions. Let us allow Lesslie Newbigin to describe it, and make a vitally important,

observation:

In the famous story of the blind men and the elephant. . . the real point of the story is constantly overlooked. The story is told from the point of view of the king and his courtiers, who are not blind but can see that the blind men are unable to grasp the full reality of the elephant and are only able to get hold of part of it. The story is constantly told in order to neutralize the affirmations of the great religions, to suggest that they learn humility and recognize that none of them can have more than one aspect of the truth. But, of course, the real point of the story is exactly the opposite. If the king were also blind, there would be no story. The story is told by the king, and it is the immensely arrogant claim of one who sees the full truth, which all the world's religions are only groping after. It embodies the claim to know the full reality which relativizes all the claims of the religions.' [37]

Newbigin brings out with clarity the arrogance of the liberal claim to be able to see all the religions from the standpoint of one who sees the full truth. The liberal pluralist is the king; the unfortunate evangelical is the blindfolded beggar. Or so the pluralist would have us believe. Perhaps a more responsible - and considerably less arrogant - approach would be to suggest that we are all, pluralists included, blind beggars, to whom God graciously makes himself known.

But what framework is to be used for understanding the religions? Elephants have limited potential in this respect. John Hick and Wilfrid Cantwell Smith object to interpreting both the place and the contents of other religious traditions from a Christian point of view. But they seem to miss the point that they have to be interpreted from some interpretative standpoint - and if they have excluded, as a matter of principle, a specifi-cally Christian viewpoint, they are obliged to adopt one which, by definition, is non-Christian. Further, Hick appears to labour under the misunderstanding that where Christian frameworks are biased, those of liberalism are neutral and disinterested. Yet one of the more significant developments within the recent sociology of knowledge has been the realization that there is no neutral point from which a religion or culture may be evalu-ated; all vantage points imply a valuation. Hick and Cantwell Smith

naively assume that their liberal pluralist approach is 'detached' or 'objective', whereas it is actually nothing of the sort.

This point is developed by Hendrik Kraemer, who argues that the comparative study of religions cannot produce univer-sally valid or neutral criteria by which the truth of those religions may be judged. They are not criteria provided by those religions themselves; they are imposed upon them, on account of the presuppositions of the commentators imposing them. The criteria Hick selects allow him to fit his material more effectively, although still unconvincingly, into his pluralist mould.

To give his case more academic credibility, Hick argues that there is a common core structure to all religions. The various religions represent equally 'valid' and 'real' experiences and apprehensions of the one divine reality. (Note that the fact that there is only one divine reality is assumed as requiring no proof - but polytheism cannot be dismissed as easily as this.) On the basis of this assumption, he declares that all religions 'are funda-mentally alike in exhibiting a soteriological structure. That is to say, they are all concerned with salvation/liberation/enlightenment/fulfilment'. [38] It may reasonably be observed, however, that these concepts of salvation are conceived in such radically different ways, that only someone who was doggedly determined, as a matter of principle, to treat them as aspects of the same greater whole would have sufficient intellectual flexibility to do so. Do Christianity and Satanism really have the same understandings of salvation? Hick would probably reply that Satanism doesn't count as a religion, thus neatly illustrating that his theory works for those religions he has preselected on the basis of their ability to fit his pluralist mould.

A more neutral observer, relieved of the necessity of insisting that all religions of the world are basically the same, might reasonably suggest that they do not merely offer different ways of achieving salvation; they offer different understandings of salvation altogether. The Rastafarian vision of a paradise in which blacks are served by whites; the old Norse concept of Valhalla; the Buddhist vision of *nirvana*; the Christian hope of resurrection to eternal life - all are so obviously different. How can all the routes

to salvation be equally 'valid' (a favourite liberal *Modezuort*), when the goals to be reached in such different ways are so obviously unrelated?

The idea that all religions are the same, or that they all lead to the same God, is thus little more than an unsubstantiated assertion, combined with a refusal to acknowledge that there are genuine and significant differences among the religions. It is a kind of fundamentalism in its own right. Only in western liberal circles would such an idea be taken seriously. (It is not accepted by any Muslim writer I have spoken to.) But what would the Christian apologist wish to say in response to the place of Christianity among the religions?

Michael Green, drawing on his considerable experience as an evangelist, and the resources of much recent writing on the relation between Christianity and other religions, perhaps says all that needs to be said:

'No faith would enjoy wide currency if it did not contain much that was true. Other faiths therefore constitute a preparation for the gospel, and Christ comes not so much to destroy as to fulfil. The convert will not feel that he has lost his background, but that he has discovered that to which, at its best, it pointed. That is certainly the attitude I have found among friends converted to Christ from Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism. They are profoundly grateful for what they have learned in those cultures, but are thrilled beyond words to have discovered a God who has stooped to their condition in coming as the man of Nazareth, and who has rescued them from guilt and alienation by his cross and resurrection.' [39]

The Christian attitude to other religions rests firmly upon the doctrines of creation and redemption. Because God created the world, we expect to find traces of him throughout his creation; because God redeemed the world through Christ, we expect to look to Christ for the salvation that the Christian gospel promises. The Lausanne Covenant (1974) states this foundational belief in the uniqueness of Christ by rejecting

'... as derogatory to Christ and the Gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and theologies. Jesus Christ, being himself the only

God-man, who gave himself as the only ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and man. There is no other name by which we must be saved.'

If God created the world, as the Christian gospel declares, we should not be in the least surprised that he has left witnesses to and traces of this event within that creation. John Calvin made a forceful distinction between the *knowledge of God the creator* (a universal knowledge, available to all peoples, including Christians), and *knowledge of God the redeemer* (a specifically Christian knowledge of God). As the Lausanne Covenant states this:

'We recognize that all men have some knowledge of God through his general revelation in nature. But we deny that this can save.'

The question therefore becomes: how can we be saved? Who is our saviour? And it is here that the doctrine of the divinity of Christ, grounded in his resurrection, becomes of central importance. No other person has ever been raised from the dead and conquered death. In no other person does God become incarnate. So important are these issues that we shall move directly to consider them, and all their implications, in the two sections which follow.

Yet a point must be noted before proceeding. The pluralist agenda has certain important theological and apologetic consequences. It is a simple matter of fact that traditional Christian theology does not lend itself particularly well to the homo-genizing agenda of religious pluralists. The suggestion that all religions are more or less talking about vaguely the same thing finds itself in difficulty in relation to certain essentially Christian ideas - most notably, the doctrines of the incarnation and Trinity. These distinctive doctrines are embarrassing to those who wish to debunk what they term the 'myth of Christian uniqueness'. We are invited, on the weak and lazy grounds of -pragmatism, to abandon those doctrines, in order that the pluralist agenda might be advanced.

In response to this pressure, a number of major Christological and theological developments may be noted. Let us note two of them briefly, before exploring them in more detail. First doctrines such as the incarnation, which imply a high profile of

identification between Jesus Christ and God, are discarded in favour of various degree Christologies, which are more amenable to the reductionist programme of liberalism. Second, the idea that God is in any sense disclosed or defined Christologically is set to one side, on account of its theologically momentous implications for the identity and significance of Jesus Christ - which liberal pluralism finds an embarrassment. Let us turn to consider, these two points.

First, the idea of the incarnation is rejected, often dismissively, as a myth. Thus John Hick and his collaborators reject the incarnation on various logical and common-sense counts - yet fail to deal with the question of why Christians should have developed this doctrine in the first place. There is an underlying agenda to this dismissal of the incarnation, and a central part of that agenda is the elimination of the sheer *distinctiveness* of Christianity. A sharp distinction is thus drawn between the historical person Jesus Christ, and the principles which he is alleged to represent. Paul Knitter is but one of a small galaxy of pluralist writers -concerned to drive a wedge between the 'Jesus-event' (unique Christianity) and the 'Christ-principle' (accessible to all religious, traditions, and expressed in their own distinctive, but equally valid, ways).

It is significant that the pluralist agenda forces its advocates to adopt heretical views of Christ in order to meet its needs. In an effort to fit Jesus into the mold of the 'great religious teachers of humanity' category, the Ebionite heresy has been revived, and made politically correct. Jesus is one of the religious options available by the great human teachers of religion.

Second, the idea that God is in some manner made known through Christ has been dismissed. Captivated by the image of a, 'Copernican Revolution' (probably one of the most overworked, and misleading phrases in recent writings in this field), pluralists demand that Christians move away from a discussion of Christ to a discussion of God - yet fail to recognize that the 'God of the, Christians' (Tertullian) might be rather different from other divinities, and that the doctrine of the Trinity spells out the nature of that distinction. The loose and vague talk about 'God' or 'Reality' found in much pluralist writing is not a result of, theological sloppiness or confusion. It is

a considered response to the recognition that for Christians to talk about the Trinity is to speak about a specific God (not just 'deity' in general), who has chosen to make himself known in and through Jesus Christ. It is a deliberate rejection of authentically and distinctive Christian insights into God, in order to suggest that Christianity, to rework a phrase of John Toland, is simply the republication of the religion of nature.

Yet human religious history shows that natural human ideas of the number, nature and character of the gods are notoriously vague and muddled. The Christian emphasis is upon the need to worship, not gods in general (Israel's strictures against Canaanite religion being especially important here), but a God who has chosen to make himself known. The doctrine of the Trinity defines and defends the distinctiveness - no, more than that: the *uniqueness* - of the 'God of the Christians'. The New Testament gives a further twist to this development through its language about 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ', locating the identity of God in the actions and passions of Jesus Christ. To put it bluntly: God is Christologically disclosed.

This point is important, given the obvious confusion within the pages of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* concerning the nature and identity of the god(s) or goddess(es) of the pluralists. Pluralism, it seems to be, possesses a certain tendency to self-destruction, in that there is, if I could put it like this, 'a plurality of pluralisms'. For example, a vigorously polemical defence of 'pluralism' (a word used frequently throughout its pages) may be found in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*. According to the authors of this volume, Christianity has to be seen in a 'pluralistic context as one of the great world faiths, one of the streams of religious life through which human beings can be savingly related to that ultimate Reality Christians know as the heavenly Father'. Yet having agreed that Christianity does not provide absolute or superior knowledge of God, the pluralist contributors to this volume proceed to display such divergence over nature of god that it becomes far from clear that they are talking about the same thing.

But there is a more important point here. Pluralism is fatally vulnerable to the charge that it reaches an accommodation between Christianity

and other religious traditions by willfully discarding every distinctive Christian doctrine traditionally regarded as identity-giving and identity-preserving (to say nothing of the reductionist liberties taken with the other religious traditions). The 'Christianity' which is declared to be homogenous with all other 'higher religions' would not be recognizable as such to most of its adherents. It would be a theologically, Christologically and soteriologically reduced version of real thing. It is thus not Christianity which is being related to other world faiths: it is little more than a parody and caricature of this living faith, grounded in the presuppositions and agendas of western liberalism rather than in the self-revelation of God, which is being related to theologically-reduced and homogenized versions of other living religions. Dialogue turns out to involve the sacrifice of integrity. The identity of Christianity is inextricably linked with the uniqueness of Christ, which is in turn grounded in the resurrection and incarnation. We may now turn to consider these.

Notes:

30 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 1. The following works should also be consulted: Norman Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970); Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); Stephen Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); Lesslie Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1969). These last two works are by leading writers with long experience of the complex Indian situation, and are especially recommended.

31 Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Pluralist World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), p. 9.

32 John Milbank, 'The End of Dialogue', in G. D'Costa (ed.), *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Orbis: Maryknoll, NY, 1990), pp. 174-191; quote at p. 176. This essay merits detailed reading.

33 John Hick, *Truth and Dialogue* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), p. 148. 34 John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Collins,

1977), p. 146. 35 Hugo Meynell, 'On the Idea of a World Theology', *Modern Theology* 1 (1985), pp. 149-163.

36 Richard Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 166.

37 Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, pp. 9-10.

38 John Hick, *The Second Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1988), p. 86.

39 Michael Green, *Evangelism and the Local Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), p. 61.