

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND THE THEOCENTRIC MODEL: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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In 1989 there were 4.9 billion people living on this earth. Of these, 309 million were Buddhists, 655 million were Hindus, 860 million were Muslims and 1.6 billion were Christians (The 1989 Almanac: 400). Contemporary theologians and philosophers of Religion have accepted that we live in a religious plural world. We can see from the figures just how much is at stake here.

Religious pluralism is an irreducible fact. We encounter people with different faiths in our own country, in our own hometown, in our factories and schools, and even in our own homes. How should we deal with this reality? Religious pluralism is not just a reality to be recognized, but a challenge to be met. 'Pluralism is today a human existential problem which raises acute questions about how we are going to live our lives in the midst of so many options. Pluralism is no longer just the old schoolbook question about the One-and-the-Many; it has become the concrete day-to-day dilemma occasioned by the encounter of mutually incompatible world views and philosophies. Today we face pluralism as the very practical question of planetary human coexistence', (Pannikar, 1979:217).

Everyone knows how much violence and death have been caused by religious strife. We know that the most fanatical and cruelest political struggles are those that have been colored, inspired and legitimized by religion. One need to recall Southern Philippines to realize what I mean. To say this is not to reduce all political conflicts to religious ones, but to accept the fact that religions share in the responsibility of bringing reconciliation and peace to our torn and warring land. Christians must come face to face with this reality. As a Christian what is my attitude toward these other religions?

The growing assumption in the ecumenical circle today is the pluralist position, Knitter, (1985). The basic assumption of this position is the need for a broader understanding of the word oikumene (the whole inhabited world) which include other religions. Mankind must unite or perish! There are two leading exponents of this position: Paul Knitter and John Hick. In the following paragraphs I shall discuss their views.

Paul Knitter and John Hick call their position toward other religions as the THEOCENTRIC MODEL (Knitter, 1985: part 3; Hick, 1982: 289). This model has three basic assumptions. Both scholars accept the reality of religious plurality but it is not absolute pluralism: there is at least the concept that there is single TRUTH or REALITY towards which different religions point. They view Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and other religions

as variants of something larger and more comprehensive reality. This is their first assumption.

Dr. John Hick, taking a historical approach, sees the problem of religious pluralism as related to man's historical development and differences in circumstances. He writes: 'Now the possibility, indeed the probability, that we have seriously to consider is that many different accounts of the divine reality may be true, though all expressed in imperfect human analogies, but that none is "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." May it not be that the different concepts of God, as Jahweh, Allah, Krishna, Param Atma, Holy Trinity, and so on; and likewise the different concepts of the hidden structure of reality, as the eternal emanation of Brahman or as an immense cosmic process culminating in Nirvana, are all images of the divine, each expressing some aspect or range of aspects and yet none by itself fully and exhaustively corresponding to the infinite nature of the ultimate reality?' (Hick, 1982:284).

Hick proposes a "new map for the universe of faiths." In describing his map, he speaks repeatedly about the Divine Spirit, Divine Reality or same ultimate reality behind all the religions. He also implies that the differences are only historical and cultural adaptations. He continues: 'It is possible to consider the hypothesis that they are all, at their experiential roots, in contact with the same ultimate reality, but that their differing experiences of that reality, interacting over the centuries with the different thought-forms of different cultures, have led to increasing differentiation and contrasting elaboration - so that Hinduism, for example, is very different phenomenon from Christianity, and very different ways of conceiving and experiencing the divine within them' (Hick, 1982:289).

Knitter, a Catholic priest, asserts that this single reality common to all religion must be accepted only as a hypothesis. But it is an important hypothesis since it creates the basis for interreligious dialogue. If we do not have something in common how could we begin the dialogue. In his book "No Other Names?" he writes: 'Dialogue must be based on the recognition of the possible truth in all religions; the ability to recognize this truth must be grounded in the hypothesis of a common ground and goal for all religions. . . . Without this deeper sharing in something beyond them all, the religions do not have a basis on which to speak to each other and work together. . . there must be the same ultimate reality, the same divine presence, the same fullness and emptiness — in Christian terms, the same God — animating all religions and providing the ultimate ground and goal of dialogue', (Knitter, 1985:208).

But there are dangers that we have to consider when we take the theocentric position or the common ground and goal view according to Knitter. We can easily impose our own definition of that reality on another religion. That is why he proposes that the common ground and goal for all religions must be taken as a hypothesis. 'As a hypothesis, it must be used cautiously; partners in dialogue cannot verify it or truly grasp its contents outside the process of dialogue. This means before engaging in dialogue, one will be hesitant to define the

common ground as either God or emptiness; and in dialogue, one will be open to the necessity of expanding or reforming one's one notion of what the ultimate really is,' (Knitter, 1985:209).

It is a hypothesis because the ultimate reality is unknowable. Even Hick asserts that the "one ultimate reality" behind all the religions is beyond the grasp of the human mind. He writes: 'Let us begin with the recognition, which is made in all main religious traditions, that the ultimate divine reality is infinite and as such transcends the grasp of the human mind. God, to us our Christian term, is infinite. He is not a thing, a part of the universe, existing, alongside other things; nor is he a being falling under a certain kind. And therefore he cannot be defined or encompassed by human thought. We cannot draw boundaries round his nature and say that he is this and no more. If we could fully define God, describing his inner being and his other limits. This would not be God. The God whom our minds can penetrate and whom our thoughts can circumnavigate is mere a finite and partial image of God', (Hick, 1982:283).

Hick asserts that it is impossible for man to comprehend the wholeness and totality of the one absolute reality. In that article, he even borrowed a parable told by Buddha to drive his point. '...there is the parable of the blind men and the elephant, said to have been told by the Buddha. An elephant was brought to a group of blind men who had never encountered such an animal before. One felt a leg and reported that an elephant is a great living pillar. Another felt the trunk and reported that an elephant is a great snake. Another felt a tusk and reported that an elephant is a sharp ploughshare. And so on. And then they all quarrelled together, each claiming that his own account was the truth and therefore all others false. In fact of course they were all true, but each referring only to one aspect of the total reality and all expressed in very imperfect analogies', (Hick, 1982:284).

In another article, Hick (1981: 46-47) distinguishes the "Eternal One in itself as the infinite Reality which exceeds the scope of human thought, language and experience," from the "Eternal one as experience, thought and expressed by finite human creatures." He seems to be using the Kantian epistemology. This epistemology distinguishes the term 'noumena from phenomena. Noumena means that which is what it is in itself (external reality) and which gives to sensation but never wholly captured in perception. Phenomena means what appears in perception. We are able to know only the appearances (phenomena). The noumena, things as they are independent of our concepts, we can never know'. (Kant, 1950). Hick and Knitter assert that man will never know the one ultimate reality.

The ultimate reality of all religions can never be presented absolutely, that is, in terms of a system of thought which is unconditioned by the relativities of human thinking but always appears within the finite human thoughtsystems of its representatives. There is one Reality, the one reality must not necessarily be expressed in one system of thought, so there are numerous interpretations or expressions. The finitude and diversities (fragmentariness)

of the human situation cannot be avoided in order to present the ONE TRUTH or ONE REALITY is some "pure" form uncontaminated by human thought, and speech. There is thus a plurality of religious truths pointing to one reality. This is the theocentric view. This is not the result of insisting on the finitude of human mind and human understanding. But the limitations of human knowledge and of expression make way for a plurality of ways of expressing the one divine reality, even when those ways cannot be conceptually reconciled with each other.

The second assumption of the theocentric position is that Jesus Christ is not unique. He is not the final revelation of God. Therefore he is not the norm for all religions. This is the most controversial (threatening?) assumption. Hick admits that 'this must be the most difficult of all issues for a Christian theology of religions,' (Hick, 1973:148).

Their main argument is based on the need to reinterpret the idea of incarnation. For Hick, it is a metaphorical or mythological idea, (Hick, 1981: 46-47). For Knitter, he views Jesus uniqueness as relational uniqueness. 'It affirms that Jesus is unique, but with a uniqueness defined by its ability to relate to — that is, to include and be included by - other unique religious figures,' (Hick, 1981: 46-47).

Thus, their concept of salvation in relation to this assumption is that all religions are different paths leading to salvation. Christianity is not the only road leading to salvation. There is salvation outside Christianity. Salvation is God's work. It is presumptuous to judge others that they are not saved or will not be saved. Only God can ultimately judge them.

The third assumption is the question of norms or criteria. Hick (1981:463) acknowledges that there are different expressions of the ultimate reality: but neither are all "concept of God or of the transcendent is valid, still less equally adequate."; "some mediate God to mankind better than others." Plurality does not mean equal validity of all religious claims. The problem, then, is what criterion or criteria to use to judge whether a particular religion actually does mediate or express the ultimate reality; or whether one religion is performing a good job of interpreting this One Absolute Divine Reality than others:

From his study of the major religions, Hick suggests that in trying to evaluate a religious tradition, one should ask: "Is this complex of religious experience, belief, and behavior soteriologically effective? Does it make possible the transformation of human experience from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness?" (Hick, 1981:462; 465-467). Hick believes that all religions have a common "soteriological structure." Religions seek to transform the human situation that they consider to be in need of salvation. They believe that salvation is possible if their followers would transcend their self-centeredness. But again the criteria must be applied with caution. (Knitter, 1985: 223).

Paul Knitter suggested five ways of evaluating religious traditions, as follows: 1) Personally, does the revelation of the religion or religious figure — the story, the myth, the

message — move the human heart? Does it stir one's feelings, the depths of one's unconscious? 2) Intellectually, does the revelation also satisfy and expand the mind? Is it intellectually coherent? Does it broaden one's horizons of understanding? 3) Practically, does the message promote the psychological health of individuals, their sense of value, purpose, freedom? Especially, does it promote the welfare, the liberation, of all peoples, integrating individual persons and nations into a larger community? (Knitter, 1985: 201).

The criteria suggested by both scholars are moral values. Human welfare, unity and justice are ethical concepts or moral values. Both authors seem to be appealing to morality to provide the norms or criteria to evaluate a religious tradition. These are the three assumptions of the theocentric position.

Some comments have to be made vis-a-vis the theocentric model. My first comment is an observation on the ongoing inter-religious dialogue. Through the centuries, Christianity flourished in a religiously plural world. What is more, it is still largely Christian-inspired. Why this should be so is surely an interesting point. The very fact that Christians sit down with others to contemplate their mutual existence is an index of the unusual situation.

Could this be the work of the Holy Spirit not discounting the sociological factors? What could have motivated the Christian theologians, pastors and lay people to carry this endeavor? Could there be a religious factor? Answers to these questions will help us appreciate more the contribution (unique?) of Christianity to world peace and unity. I believe that our purpose in dialogue should not be the elimination of our differences, but to appreciate each other's faith, and cooperate with one another in overcoming violence, war, and injustice in the world.

Another comment is with reference to the question of salvation and norms. Salvation is the work of God. No one should arrogate to oneself the authority to judge who will be saved and who will not be saved. This is the assumption of the theocentric theologians. I agree. But it is neither an excuse to avoid the question of salvation nor to dilute the Gospel, i.e., the Good News of Salvation in Jesus Christ. Can we reduce salvation to ethics? Does salvation mean good works? Is it more than good works or moral values? Christians in history have affirmed that salvation has been made possible because God has acted in history and fulfilled His saving act in the historical person of man Jesus. Can we make this confession without limiting to Christians the saving work of God? Can we remain faithful to Jesus even though he is no longer unique? For Knitter it is possible and healthy. He compares it to a married man admiring other women, (Knitter, 1985:201).

This leads to a third and last comment. The problem of diverse claims made by the different religions must be confronted. Can the theocentric position provide us a way to confront the problem of diverse truth-claims? The attempt at making different (and competing) religious traditions compatible by postulating the existence of One Ultimate Reality

which is the source of all revelation would, however, depend on identifying this reality with another. Can such identifications be justified?

Let me give a simple example. What justifies in saying that the Christian and Muslim worship the same God? As far as the concepts and practices go, the Christian God and Allah are different. The Christian worships Christ as the Second Person in the Trinity. He is the incarnation of God. These are elements not present in the Muslim understanding of Allah. Their God is not simply the One, but the only One. Compared with the Triune God of the Christian, the God of the Muslim is indeed a God without mystery. The classic formula expressing the oneness and uniqueness of God is found in a short sura (No. 112) that is always quoted by Muslims as a kind of credo:

"He is God, One,
God, the Everlasting Refuge,
Who has not begotten, and has not been begotten,
and equal to Him is not any one."

It is a polemic against the "begotten, not made" of the Nicene Creed. Muslims clearly reject the Trinity of the Christians.

Thus conceptually the Christian God and Allah are different. The scholars who make the statement "The Christian and the Muslim worship the same God" presuppose the existence of a single God for both Christians and Muslims. What is the vantage ground from which this claim comes from? What higher concept of God do they have which enables them to reconcile the incompatible concepts of the Muslim and Christian about their God (Allah)? In brief, the main problem of the theocentric position is the problem of identifying the religious ultimate.

Hick and Knitter assert that man will never fully know the one ultimate reality. But they assert (hypothesize) that there is one ultimate reality for all religions. From what assumption do they assert this common ground and goal for all religion? This question must be answered satisfactorily both theologically and biblically. Christians claim that this transcendent reality was fully revealed in Jesus Christ. This claim is found in the scripture. The early Christian affirmed by faith that Jesus Christ is the "fullness of God", "but did not claim equality with God but emptied himself." (*Colossians 1:10; Philippians 2.*)

The problem of diverse truth-claims made by different religions is one problem that must be confronted. The pluralist position is attractive but it is doubtful whether it could resolve the problem of truth-claims considering the present state of religious awareness, because it is an assumption in itself. What can be certified is the incompatibility (at present) between religious claims. It is a further question as to the criteria for resolving question of truths. At the moment, we must accept that every religion has a given starting point, each unique. Even a theocentric theologian will have to begin from his faith.

But the theocentric model I am certain can broaden our understanding of our faith and make us more humble when we do mission work in the world. They show us that religious pluralism is a reality. And the problem of diverse claims made by different religions can be resolved (temporarily) by postulating the notion of the existence of One Eternal Reality behind all religious truth-claims. Thus, their position is not for an absolute pluralism. Against absolute pluralism, this model asserts that we do know the truth. We are not absolute ignorant of ultimate transcendent reality, because the ultimate has revealed its nature in all religions. It is a false humility, a rejection of the act of one divine reality to take refuge in agnosticism and respond to all ultimate questions with a "who knows?" We know.

Against the arrogant claims of religions (Christianity?) that this-world human knowledge is absolute, to the logical framework of which all claims to speak of ultimate truth must be subject, they insist that all knowledge of whatever sort is incomplete. It must correspond to what is seen in the moment of revelation. We know in part. Christian humility is made indispensable.

Considering all the questions which have been raised regarding the theocentric position, are we ready to set aside our differences particularly in doctrines and practices in the interest of human welfare, compassion, unity and justice? Setting aside our doctrines and practice does it mean they have no value in the struggle for justice, peace and unity?

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