

Track One:

Christian Theology of Religions

The Indian Christian theologian, Stanley Samartha, once asked the question: 'Can it be that it is the will of God that many religions should continue in the world?'¹ The question is rhetorical because it seems to expect the answer 'yes', with an implicit hint that such an answer might free the Christian community from its obsession with categorizing other religions as a problem. Most Christian answers to the challenges of religious diversity have explained this diversity as a function of either error or moral failure. But Samartha has opened the door to the scandalous possibility that other religions are the products of divine intention rather than human accident – with the consequence that they have a theological right to exist and be heard!

In asking his question, Samartha inevitably betrays his own Indian religious ethos, which classically celebrates diversity as the norm. But he is also responding to the full accumulative weight of the new global context. It is not only the *matter of fact existence* of many religions but also their *persistence* as vibrant contexts for 'transcendent vision and human transformation' that requires explanation. Can there be more than one revelation of Ultimate Reality, on the same human level, as it were, as Christianity?

Formulating the question of plurality in this manner opens up the central question of the meaning of revelation. By revelation I refer to the dynamic tension in religious apprehension between, on the one hand, the particular experience of transcendent vision that has been generated initially under specific cultural and local circumstances, and on the other hand, the universal power and presence of transcendent vision that is accepted as the

prior ground of its local manifestation. There is a theological tension between the two: the apprehension of divine universal presence derives from the power of particular experience and the particularity of experience serves a universal purpose. Negotiating this theological tension becomes more complex once the contemporary plural context is viewed positively.

This chapter rehearses in broad terms some of the theories currently discussed under the heading of the Christian theology of religions. It will follow a typology which I first developed in 1983 under the much-discussed categories of 'Exclusivism', 'Inclusivism' and 'Pluralism'. Since then, the typology has been criticized as being either too simplistic or too restrictive for dealing with the wide-ranging theological challenge that the positive approach to plurality promises. However, my observations during the intervening years are that the criticisms are usually based on a misapprehension which fails to realize that each type of response is capable of embracing a number of different forms. I defended the typology in 1993, and continue to find it useful in so far as the positions it describes are well represented in the ever-expanding literature.² Paul Knitter has generously defended the typology, even at the expense of some of his own carefully crafted suggestions, thus: 'these three classifications represent in broad lines the differing presuppositions and approaches within recent Christian efforts to make sense of the many religions.'³ Knitter adds the caveat that theological models are only illuminating so long as they are treated as a 'workable framework' and leave room for expansion and modification. This is a comment with which I am happy to concur and I accept that it applies also in the search for a Christian theology of religions.

I shall now describe briefly and offer some comments on each type of approach, and give reasons why I consider the pluralist case as the one which does best justice to all of the factors involved. Towards the end of my discussion I shall return to the issue of the typology's usefulness in order to note how the critic's dismissal of it is often a rhetorical device for reinstating more conservative proposals.

Exclusivism

Exclusivism is the view that only in Christian faith can the authentic truth of God's offer of 'transcendent vision and human transformation' in the world be found. Let the following citation serve as an example of this position:

The Gospel of Jesus Christ comes to us with a built-in prejudgment of all other faiths so that we know in advance of our study what we must ultimately conclude about them. They give meanings to life apart from that which God has given in the biblical story culminating with Jesus Christ, and they organize life outside the covenant community of Jesus Christ. Therefore, devoid of this saving knowledge and power of God, they actually lead men away from God and hold them captive before God. This definitive and blanket judgment . . . is not derived from our investigation of the religions but is given in the structure and content of Gospel faith itself.⁴

This argument is forcefully made. It accepts that what is at stake is not a comparison of religious benefits, fruits or experiences but a theological judgement. It is simply that those who 'organize life outside the covenant community of Jesus Christ' are not recipients of divine grace. 'Christian faith' and 'the rest' are different species. But more is involved, especially when the writer avers that other traditions 'actually lead men away from God'. How does the writer know this? The answer is that it is dogmatically 'given in the structure and content of Gospel faith itself'.

I suggest that in fact there are two main principles at work in this citation. First, there is an appeal to the theological notion of revelation – 'God has given'; and second, there is the confessional clinging to the 'structure and content of Gospel faith itself'. Let me respond to both these aspects of Exclusivism.

First, no matter how varied the form or emphasis of a particular theory of revelation, we need to remember that the awareness of revelation is essentially a voluntary act.⁵ Thus, according to one philosopher of religion: 'authentic religion is the gratuitous human response to a gratuitous revelation of the divine'.⁶ In other words, the human response to revelation

cannot simply be one of passive reception in the face of given divine revelation. In the voluntary act of its recognition, revelation is both experienced as gift and creatively appropriated, moulded and interpreted via the human religious imagination.

At the heart of Exclusivism is the incipient claim to have received a kind of 'neat' revelation; and it is this which creates the impression of its arbitrariness. But the gratuitousness of revelation cannot be circumnavigated. It is a means for rejoicing in what has been discovered, received and shaped, but from it there is no plausible argument that leads inexorably to the condemnation of other faith-traditions. One could push the point further: the awareness of this gratuitousness, coupled with the insight about the universality of the divine presence to which the gift of faith is a response, alerts us to the expectation that the experience and knowledge of Ultimate Reality may not be confined to one instance of its particular apprehension.

The second cause for concern with Exclusivism is the appeal to the 'structure and content of Gospel faith itself' with its background in the 'biblical story' as a whole. Setting aside the very real difficulties with the basic exegetical-theological conception of a single 'biblical story culminating with Jesus Christ', how are we to interpret the biblical literature in respect of 'other religions'? The Bible is often assumed to be 'against' other religions. But this is obviously too simple a judgement. There are numerous examples of divine involvement with different peoples. God may have 'chosen' his people Israel, but he also calls 'others': 'Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?', declares the eighth-century (BCE) prophet Amos (9.7). And in the Christian New Testament, the evangelist Matthew, for example, accepts that those who do the will of the Father are welcomed into the kingdom of heaven and not just those who call out the Lord's name (Matt. 25.31-46). Moving beyond literalism, the question is how to interpret the Bible's 'particularity' (or set of particularities) in relation to its 'universal' impulses. This is both an exegetical question in relation to historically conditioned material, and a hermeneutical question arising from the need for theological translation in a vastly different historical context.

A more broadly based analysis of the 'biblical story' has been

suggested by the Catholic scholars, Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller. Following an in-depth survey of the biblical literature in relation to mission, they accept that 'a staggering question for the contemporary church is that of Christianity's relationship to non-Christian religions'. They then draw the startling exegetical conclusion: 'No comprehensive solution to this issue can be found in the Bible.' Perhaps that is hardly surprising, for the biblical writers were not faced precisely by our contemporary realities. In terms of the hermeneutical possibilities, however, Senior and Stuhlmueller continue, '[the Bible] does offer some leads'.⁷ The leads they suggest build on the universal intuitions of biblical history. These accept that the activity of God extends beyond the immediate experiences of Israel and the first churches in complex and dialectical ways – in the validity of the religious experiences of other peoples/cultures and through the pervasive divine presence in creation and world history. The final conclusion of Senior and Stuhlmueller is that 'the God of the Bible sends his people out to reveal and to discover his love in places beyond sectarian borders'.

The advantage of this broad-based approach to the 'biblical story' is that it does draw the sting of those whose stand on the authority of scripture assumes that it leads to an exclusivist-type approach in the theology of religions. The discovery of God 'beyond sectarian borders' is a far cry from the 'definitive and blanket judgment' envisaged by the exclusivist citation above. The issue of what form a creative theology of religions might take in the changed plural conditions of today can only be answered with reference to the wider debate surrounding biblical hermeneutics.

Inclusivism

In the theological negotiation between the poles of particularity and universality, exclusivist views end up by recasting the polarity as a contradiction. The second type of Christian response in the theology of religions claims to balance the two poles by honouring two so-called theological axioms: (1) the affirmation that Christian salvation has been made effective in the world

through its embodiment in the person of Jesus Christ (particularity), and (2) the belief in the universal will of God to save all peoples (universality). Let the official Catholic encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*, sum up this point of view:

The universality of salvation means that it is granted not only to those who explicitly believe in Christ and have entered the Church. Since salvation is offered to all, it must be made concretely available to all. But it is clear that today, as in the past, many people do not have an opportunity to come to know or accept the Gospel revelation or to enter the Church. The social and cultural conditions in which they live do not permit this, and frequently they have been brought up in other religious traditions. For such people salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation. This grace comes from Christ; it is the result of his Sacrifice and is communicated by the Holy Spirit. It enables each person to attain salvation through his or her free co-operation.

Although participated forms of mediation of different kinds and degrees are not excluded, they acquire meaning and value *only* from Christ's own mediation, and they cannot be understood as parallel or complementary to his.⁸

With the absorption of historical consciousness, inclusivism accepts that elements of religious value and truth springing from God's universal presence in creation and history are necessarily embodied in tradition. Therefore other traditions *per se* can be vehicles of Christian saving grace. Many theologians from the three main branches of the Christian tree now accept the general thrust of the inclusivist outlook.

However, I want to draw attention to three problems associated with this approach. First, in order to demonstrate how it is that the grace of Christ is experienced without knowing or naming it as such from within the historical life of other faith-traditions, some 'theological linkage' between Christian faith and other traditions needs to be specified. In the past, the notion

of 'fulfilment' provided the conceptual assurance of this linkage, but this is now generally thought to be problematic (see Chapter 3). More recent theories of the inclusivist type are likely to seek some less predetermined possibility of 'spiritual association' between Christian faith and other faith-traditions. But the overall aim is to demonstrate how the Christian witness to ultimate truth makes explicit that which is at work implicitly through the witness of others.

Such an aim need not necessarily be interpreted as a triumphalistic move. Indeed, many inclusivist-minded theologians also acknowledge the rich possibilities by which other religions might even complement Christianity's sense of its own witness to religious truth. Nevertheless, the overriding impression remains that Christian faith retains the spiritual and theological edge on others. As the inclusivist Jacques Dupuis says: 'Salvation is at work everywhere; but in the concrete figure of the crucified Christ the work of salvation is seen to be accomplished.'⁹ It seems to me that it is virtually impossible to establish a 'theological linkage' that is not already tailored to Christian supremacy.

The second problem with inclusivism concerns the meaning which can be attached to the notion of Christ's 'Sacrifice' extending to other religions. How can an historical event-cum-belief – the death and resurrection of Jesus – be effective retroactively before the life of Jesus himself? How can it extend to the Buddhist tradition which began 500 years prior to Christianity, or to the Hindu, Jain or Primal traditions whose origins date back further? The notion seems highly improbable.

One way round this difficulty is to point not to the *origins* of salvation in the historical Jesus but to the *climactic expression* of his universal effectiveness through the presence of the *logos* which he is said to embody and exhibit in quintessential measure. This route recalls and builds on theories of the early Christian Apologists. These were Christian philosophers who praised the light of divine reason in other religious philosophies while simultaneously affirming that the grounding and summation of that light was found in the person of Jesus. In doing so they were able to accept that those who practised justice and 'the good' received a share in the divine life, which nevertheless had eventually declared itself 'enfleshed' in the historical life of Jesus. The

important point about this 'logos-Christ' doctrine is that, apart from its abstraction, Jesus 'saves' by embodying the goal of the religious life rather than by initiating a process of salvation dating from the fixed time of Jesus himself. In other words, the importance of Jesus is less his 'Sacrifice' and more his normative value (a lesser sounding judgemental measure) in comparison with other saviour or revealer figures. Nevertheless, we are back here with having to 'prove' that normative value, spiritually or historically. To date I know of no case that demonstrates such normativity beyond its formal theological supposition.

It seems that honouring the two axioms along the inclusivist way brings unmanageable problems. The contradictions felt with exclusivist views are lessened, but the pull between the two axioms remains unresolved. As Paul Knitter has put it: 'It does not seem possible to maintain this traditional insistence on the ontological necessity of Christ for salvation and at the same time coherently profess belief in the universal salvific will of the Christian God.'¹⁰ I shall take up the christological aspects of Inclusivism in Chapter 4.

Some theologians, feeling the weight of the kind of critique I have just offered, have turned more to other Christian ideas in order to devise strategies which seek to combine universality with particularity. The theological symbols of the Spirit or the kingdom of God are said to offer an attractive alternative route for engaging with other religions, without any sense of prejudging that the direct christological approaches seem to involve. The Spirit can be viewed as the 'free agent' of God's universal presence, independent of Christ or the church; and the kingdom signifies the eschatological reality of God's final rule which runs ahead, as it were, of all religions. 'Christ' neither exhausts the Spirit's activity nor forecloses kingdom-shaped realities discovered through dialogue and collaboration.

In other words, the universal-sounding language of the kingdom and the Spirit would seem to be exempt from the historical problems inherent in christological inclusivism. 'The kingdom' summons both the church and other faith-communities to a profound commitment to a more peaceful and equitable society. So 'kingdom' values are advanced each time the poor win justice, or when one small corner of the planet is shielded from

further ecological devastation. The activity too of the 'Spirit' is not bound by its Christian expression. It 'blows where it wills', inspiring a vision of the spiritual life wherever human beings catch a glimpse of ultimate meaning and transcend their ego-centred existence.

However, my own view is that these moves do not really resolve the central difficulty. The reason has been given, again, by Dupuis:

While the believers of other religious faiths perceive God's call through their own traditions and respond to it in the sincere practice of these traditions, they become in all truth – even without being formally conscious of it – active members of the Kingdom. In the final analysis, then, a theology of religions following the Kingdom-centered model cannot bypass or avoid the Christocentric perspective.¹¹

Yet, as we have seen, it is the christocentric perspective, which is so problematic for Inclusivism.

Pluralism

Just as Exclusivism and Inclusivism contain a spectrum of forms, the same is true of the third option, Pluralism. At the outset, however, we should dismiss the easy misunderstanding – even caricature – of this position. This is the proposal that the many religions worship and believe in the same God and that therefore religious differences and philosophical and theological clashes between different religions in their reflective-systematic dimensions are irrelevant. There is no serious pluralist theologian of religions, of whom I know, that advocates this view in the Christian theology of religions debate.

There is of course a related and serious position, situated within a Hindu philosophical ethos that comes close to this outlook. Consider, for example, Swami Vivekananda's image of a circle with different radii as an explanation of the unity-in-diversity of the religions:

If it be true that God is the center of all religions, and that each of us is moving towards Him along one of these radii, then it

is certain that all of us *must* reach that center. And at the center where all radii meet, all our differences will cease; but until we reach there, differences there must be.¹²

Vivekananda was a follower of Advaita Vedanta, a non-dual form of Hinduism that distinguishes between higher (i.e. philosophical non-duality) and lower (i.e. devotional worship of deities) levels of religious apprehension and practice. What he achieved was the expansion in modern times of a particular Hindu philosophy – one that had developed in one cultural setting over many centuries in order to accommodate a variety of religious expressions and practices – to explain an even greater awareness of contemporary global religious life. Variety is to be expected; but the goal of the religions remains the same: that ‘they are true manifestations of the same truth, and that they all lead to the same conclusions as the *advaita* has reached’.¹³

There is much more to the views of Vivekananda than I have depicted here. However, it is clear that to adopt Advaita Vedanta as the solution to the challenges of religious plurality would be essentially to adopt a form of Inclusivism based on a Hindu outlook. The *advaitic* notion of the divine has supplied the controlling image of Ultimate Reality and all other images are subservient to this. The Pluralism that I have in mind, on the other hand, moves beyond the controlling images of any one of the religions.

One of the foremost exponents of a philosophically tuned and religiously motivated Pluralism is John Hick, who has propounded, developed and defended his views over a number of years.¹⁴ Let the following citation set the scene:

If salvation is taking place, and taking place to about the same extent, within the religious systems presided over by these various deities and absolutes, this suggests that they are different manifestations to humanity of a yet more ultimate ground of all salvific transformation . . .

If, then, we proceed inductively from the phenomenon of religious experience around the world, adopting a religious as distinguished from a naturalistic interpretation of it, we are

likely to find ourselves making two moves. The first is to postulate an ultimate transcendent divine reality (which I have been referring to as the Real) which, being beyond the scope of our human concepts, cannot be directly experienced by us as it is in itself but only as it appears through our various human thought-forms. And the second is to identify the thought-and-experienced deities and absolutes as different manifestations of the Real within different historical forms of human consciousness.¹⁵

Pluralists accept that the religions, when conceived merely as systems of belief, are bound to exhibit conflicting beliefs at conceptual levels. However, as contexts of 'transcendent vision and human transformation' the religions are not primarily systems of philosophical and theological rationality, although of course they do involve themselves in extensive reflective processes and are shaped in large measure by them. But if the issue of plurality is approached from the perspective of the *transformative* purpose for which the religions exist, then a different possibility in the theology of religions becomes available.

Let me now set out the pluralist approach in a number of steps:

- 1 The authenticity and truth of the Christian Way is based on the validity of the religious experience it embodies; i.e. the basic Christian affirmation of 'transcendent vision and human transformation' is trustworthy as real experience and it has cognitive implications.
- 2 This Christian act of trustworthiness can be extended to others on the basis that other religious contexts too provide a framework for 'transcendent vision and human transformation'; i.e. there is no reason to doubt the validity of the religious apprehension of other religious traditions and every reason to accept their integrity.
- 3 The spiritual fruits of the many faith-traditions seem comparable: all have inspired saints and holy figures who have been active on either individual or sociopolitical levels (or both), and all have demonstrated their share of complicity in support of different kinds of social ills, such as racism,

war, sexual prejudice, and so on; i.e. the comparability of spiritual fruits suggests a common source of inspiration, however this is portrayed in different traditions.

- 4 The distinction occurring in all faith-traditions between the 'unknowability' and the 'knowability' of Ultimate Reality in terms of symbolic/iconic forms is the key distinction which allows for the hypothesis of Ultimate Reality to be experienced and conceptualized in different symbolic/iconic forms according to cultural history; i.e. Ultimate Reality as ineffable is yet the deeper ground of the varied manifestations of ultimacy glimpsed through the varied lenses of the historical and cultural forms of the religions themselves.
- 5 Theologies and religious philosophies have evolved within particular cultural environments, reflecting the limitations of these environments, but the faith-traditions now need to develop new directions for their theologies and philosophies in order to account for the wider picture encompassed by religious plurality. In Christianity, this entails formulating Christian belief in a manner which respects the integrity of other traditions; i.e. the effectiveness of Christian belief need not depend on theological interpretations which are treated as necessarily absolute and/or exclusive.
- 6 Criteria for distinguishing between good and bad religion, and between true and false religion need to be developed; i.e. in order to dispel the relativist caricature that 'anything goes' pluralists have an ongoing task to specify critically the grounds on which certain manifestations of religion are more and less acceptable.
- 7 Each tradition has both an adequate and inadequate grasp of the relationship between particularity and universality; i.e. each particular vision of the universal availability of Ultimate Reality is an adequate (if also conditioned and partial) view of the whole yet complementary to other equally adequate (if also conditioned and partial) perspectives of the whole.
- 8 Belief systems are practical means for achieving the religious ends of 'transcendent vision and human transformation'. While this entails that many metaphysical and other disagreements between traditions will remain it does not invalidate the basic picture of complementarity; i.e. patterns of what

constitutes complementarity can be pursued through critical dialogue, in mutual respect and without prejudice.

Although this list of points building up the pluralist option is rather telescoped down, I trust it provides an accurate statement of at least one main form of the pluralist option.¹⁶ It marks a break with exclusivist and inclusivist outlooks because it does not interpret religious plurality from the perspective of Christian absolutism. It allows for the distinctiveness of the Christian voice, but it neither elevates Christian faith into a position of superiority, finality, unsurpassibility, or exclusivity, nor renders other faith-traditions as lesser versions of what has emerged through the greater Christian tradition.

In terms of the tension between the particularity and universality of Ultimate Reality in its Christian form, Pluralism recognizes that the affirmation of universality is not the evocation of a generalized sense of divine presence in creation and history but turns out to be an affirmation of a series of differently centred and organized religious particularities, each with their own validity.

Some Objections

A number of overlapping criticisms of the pluralist option have been expressed from different perspectives. Let me respond now, in a preliminary way, to criticisms raised roughly from the three perspectives of Religious Studies, Philosophy and Theology. I shall reserve a fuller discussion of the issues for Chapter 6.

First, specialists from a Religious Studies background might complain that the tendency of Pluralism is towards assuming similarities where in fact great divergences exist. My phrase 'transcendent vision and human transformation', it could be argued, pre-empt what we are to think of the religions prior to their actual encounter. The religions display different views of what is 'transcendent' and different recommendations for 'human transformation'. While it is true that the religions are radically particular when viewed as whole apprehensions of religious life, I do not myself think that this necessarily undermines the point, outlined in Chapter 1, that a generic Cycle of

Religious Life is a legitimate inference to make based on observation and experience. The alternative picture is that we accept that each religion is locked into its own version of what constitutes the meaning of life. But this seems hardly attractive, let alone possible in today's global interconnectedness. Citing Max Müller's famous line – 'he who knows one religion . . . knows none' – the American scholar of religions, Rita Gross, follows this with the observation: 'One cannot understand the specificity and uniqueness of one's religion if one does not have a basis for comparison.'¹⁷ This far-reaching remark undercuts the drive towards isolationism. From a pluralist perspective it provides backing for the intention in the hypothesis to honour both the radical differences between the religions and their transcendent origins in the ineffability of Ultimate Reality.

Second, a common objection from a philosophical angle against Pluralism is that it is dependent on European Enlightenment patterns of rationality precisely at a time when these patterns are coming under severe criticism. The Enlightenment, it is claimed, sought to achieve a 'totalizing' universal rationality based on secular premises, and it is this claim to 'totalizing' universality which is now being questioned. This criticism, it seems to me, is misplaced. For there is a distinction surely between the inflated claims of a (secular) philosophical theory, which allegedly provides the world with the so-called final 'grand narrative', and the now fairly generally accepted observation that conditions of history and culture have played a large part in shaping the thought-forms, frameworks of interpretation, and conceptual apparatus attaching to faith-traditions. One can take advantageous note of the latter while disowning the former.

Accepting the human conditions attaching to religious beliefs, traditions, symbolic patterns, and so on, does not mean that Pluralism is a form of secularism. Again, as Rita Gross has shown:

Upon further reflection, it becomes clear that acknowledging the human component and the cultural relativity of religion in no way threatens the validity or relevance of religion in general or of any specific religion. Beneath all the culturally

relative and culture-bound symbols or beliefs, and at the heart of the human creativity and responsiveness generating religious symbols and beliefs, is That Which stimulates such responses.¹⁸

In other words, Pluralism does not erect another grand narrative, so much as follow through the consequences of philosophical observations about how knowledge comes to human consciousness and then applies this in the realm of (plural) religious consciousness. So the differences between the names given to 'That Which' is conceived of as ultimate in the different religious traditions are differences between different phenomenal manifestations of the one noumenal Ultimate Reality. They are not differences between different names for the same directly accessible ultimate referent.

Turning now, third, to the theological area of objection, a number of theologians complain that Pluralism can never be fully embraced as a Christian option because it is based on premises other than those ruled by the governing Christian idea of Christ. For example, Christoph Schwöbel has written: 'From the perspective of Christian faith there is no escape from the universality of God's presence in the particularity of religions. The particular constitution of this conviction, however, excludes the theological possibility of talking about a plurality of revelations in the religions.'¹⁹ Schwöbel insists that we only know about the universal presence of Ultimate Reality by virtue of Christ. Of course, if revelation is defined as a Christian term then there will obviously be no revelation outside the Christian appreciation of it! But it is exactly this confinement of terms which the experience of plurality calls into question. Christian revelation speaks of the revelation of the love of God in Christ. Are we to think that nothing of love could be discovered outside the Christian revealing of it? Schwöbel would not wish to confine the reality of love to Christian practice only; far from it. But the belief that it is permissible for a Christian to recognize the love that is bound to exist elsewhere only in terms of its Christian definition seems to me to be frankly odd. The scriptures, theologies and practices of other religious-traditions are full of references to love.²⁰

Reaffirming the Typology

For the remainder of this chapter, I would like to return to the question of the viability of the threefold typology: Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism. As I noted earlier, there have been numerous calls to abandon the typology on the grounds that it fails to take accurate account of the views of a number of serious theologians. So Wesley Ariarajah, for example, claims: 'The debate on the theology of religions needs to be much more nuanced than these positions would allow.'²¹ However, I am inclined to think that the typology is roughly a correct guide because a number of writers who express a desire to move beyond it, when they submit their own positive proposals, turn out to exemplify one of the three positions. Most often this turns out to be the inclusivist one. An instructive example of this can be found in the Church of England's Doctrine Commission Report, entitled *The Mystery of Salvation* (1995). The report advocates 'moving beyond any one of these three positions', only to reinstate a view based directly on the two axioms of Inclusivism:

- (1) We do assert that God can and does work in people of other religions, and indeed within other religions, and that this is by his Spirit.
- (2) In the ultimate sense, salvation is defined by having Jesus Christ as its source and goal.²²

The report finally calls for an eschatological resolution of the issue of 'salvation' whereby Christ will be acknowledged as 'the definitive focus of salvation in its fully comprehensive meaning'.²³

Perhaps we should be grateful to the Doctrine Commission for clarifying the extent to which the typology remains valid, even as it is disowned! However, what was misleading was for the report to insist that the typology has been superseded and then offer a variation (albeit generously sculptured) of the inclusivist approach. Other examples in the Christian theology of religions, which are often based on the doctrine of the Trinity pursue a similar strategy.²⁴ I shall discuss some of these in Chapters 6 and 8.

It is true that some serious positions in the Christian theology of religions appear not to fall neatly within the classification. Before concluding this chapter, therefore, let me comment on two examples that come under this rubric. The first appears to be situated on the borders between Exclusivism and Inclusivism, and the second seems to fall between Inclusivism and Pluralism.

First, those who affirm the universal activity of God outside the church in individuals, but believe that there is no warrant for supporting the claim that other faith-traditions as such can be viewed as 'vehicles of salvation', are moving beyond the strict end of Exclusivism and are edging towards Inclusivism. The missiologist, Lesslie Newbigin, typified this position, and it has been claimed that the views of the later Karl Barth, which allowed for 'secular parables of the kingdom' outside Christian faith, can be extended in principle to provide grounds for inter-religious dialogue from a Christian perspective.²⁵ But from my point of view, in so far as a theory retains the absoluteness of the Christian message (as did Barth and Newbigin) and refrains from considering the possibility that other faith-traditions as 'hidden', 'implicit' or 'anonymous' vehicles of saving grace, then it bears the essential marks of Exclusivism.

Furthermore, there is a good reason why Exclusivism and Inclusivism are not always capable of being distinguished succinctly from one another. In so far as exclusivist thinking has a universalist aspect (recognizing the general divine presence throughout creation) and therefore leans towards inclusivist thinking, and in so far as inclusivist thinking bases its universal emphasis (recognizing other faith-traditions as vehicles of 'salvation') on Christian absolutism and therefore leans towards exclusivist thinking, Exclusivism and Inclusivism are two sides of the same coin. They are distinguished mainly by their attitudes towards other faith-traditions as valid vehicles of what I have called 'transcendent vision and human transformation'.

The real dividing-line is between those who wish to retain Christian absoluteness and those who are willing to surrender it. And this brings me to the second area of ambiguity where Inclusivism and Pluralism appear to overlap. An example of this ambiguity can be found in a helpful series of propositions listed

by the Australian philosopher of religion, Max Charlesworth. Setting his views out as a *credo*, Charlesworth writes:

- 1 I believe that 'God' wills that all should be saved or achieve enlightenment and that all human beings have access to the means of salvation or enlightenment through some mode of revelation.
- 2 I believe (as a Christian, or a Jew, or a Muslim, or a Hindu or Buddhist etc.) that my religious tradition has a privileged and paradigmatic status and that 'God' has revealed himself more completely in that tradition.
- 3 I believe that certain authentic religious values which are implicit or latent within my tradition, but which have not actually been developed within that tradition, may be manifested or expressed in other religious traditions.
- 4 I believe that there is also the possibility of authentic religious revelations, complementary to the paradigmatic revelation of my tradition but 'outside' my own tradition.
- 5 I believe that 'God's revelation' will only be known in its fullness when, as an ideal limit, all the 'revelations' and their 'developments' are brought together in some way.
- 6 I believe that religious diversity is in some sense willed by 'God' and has its own intrinsic meaning and purpose and is not merely the result of sin and ignorance.
- 7 I believe that respect for, openness to, and dialogue with, other religious traditions, must be part of any authentic religious tradition.²⁶

This position looks to be pluralist-minded but in fact it embraces a form of Inclusivism that many may well find generous and attractive. It allows for the integrity of different traditions, seeks complementarity in a greater fullness, yet pulls back from Pluralism by advocating the 'privileged and paradigmatic status' of one tradition. Part of the reason for this, Charlesworth explains, is that pluralist theories rely on philosophical frameworks of a Neoplatonic kind – where the one Ultimate divine Reality is experienced and expressed in numerous concrete historical forms – and the problem is that some traditions, such as Buddhism or Confucianism, simply do not recognize this type

of philosophical framework. For example, Buddhist 'emptiness', it has been said, is equated with ultimate truth itself and is not to be transcended in some higher notion.²⁷

Charlesworth's objection can be met by invoking the notion of ineffability, which all traditions acknowledge in their varying respects. Christian theology has always accepted that any image of God does not exhaust the reality of God and to that extent images of God are pointers to, or culturally conditioned interpretations of the ineffable character of God's ultimacy. Similarly, the Buddhist notion of 'emptiness' is best interpreted as the radical negation of all forms of religious apprehension which seek to offer a definitive characterization of Ultimate Reality that is uncharacterizable because it is ineffable. Edward Conze, the celebrated authority on Buddhism, has written about the analogous relationship between different views of Ultimate Reality: 'The Buddhist idea of ultimate reality is very much akin to the philosophical notion of the 'Absolute', and not easily distinguished from the notion of God among the more mystical theologians, like Dionysius Areopagita and Eckhart.'²⁸ And one merit of Hick's well-known distinction between 'the Real *an sich*' (ultimate transcategorical reality) and the 'personae' (the 'Gods' of theistic traditions) together with the 'impersonae' (the 'non-personal absolutes' of non-theistic traditions) – with the latter acting as manifestations of the former to human consciousness in different religious faith-traditions – is that it was developed in order to encompass both theistic and non-theistic religious experiences within an overarching hypothesis.²⁹ It does not equate the theistic images of God with Buddhist notions of Emptiness (or with advaita Hindu notions of Ultimate Reality as Brahman), and so on, but accepts their analogous comparability.

Without these distinctions the contradiction in Charlesworth's theses, namely, the retention of a 'privileged status' for one tradition while embracing positively the revelatory power of other faith-traditions, cannot be resolved. This is what renders his views inclusivist at the end of the day. Otherwise, his *credo* clarifies the elements of a pluralist understanding well.

This chapter has examined a spectrum of debate in the Christian theology of religions or Track One of interfaith encounter.

It advocates Pluralism as a reasonable hypothesis to explain the persistence of the many faith-traditions in relationship to Christian faith. More exactly, I have outlined only one form of Pluralism, but I am aware that pluralist approaches are not of a single kind. In particular, I have not engaged with the imaginative and substantial writings of the Christian theologian, Paul Knitter, whose evolving understanding has focused more on the theme of 'liberation' as the controlling factor in the pluralist outlook, rather than on the more philosophical aspects of the hypothesis considered here.³⁰ Also, in line with the scheme of the book, I have not as yet directly engaged with the Christian theology of religions debate in the light of the mushrooming dialogue between the faith-traditions. Perspectives and questions from that quarter that have a bearing on the theology of religions will be addressed in later chapters, and particularly in Chapter 6.

Notes

1 Stanley Samartha, *One Christ – Many Religions*, Maryknoll: Orbis Press 1991, p. 79.

2 See my *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, London: SCM Press and Maryknoll: Orbis Press 1983. A second edition, published by SCM Press in 1993, embodied some minor corrections and was expanded to include a final chapter, 'Ten Years Later: Surveying the Scene', which defended the typology.

3 Paul Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility*, Maryknoll: Orbis Press 1995, p. 26.

4 Edmund Perry, *The Gospel in Dispute: The Relation of Christian Faith to Other Missionary Religions*, Doubleday: New York 1958, pp. 18f., and cited by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, 'The Christian in a Religiously Plural World', *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings*, ed. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, Glasgow: Collins, Fount Paperbacks 1980, p. 140.

5 See, for example, Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1992.

6 Max Charlesworth, *Religious Inventions: Four Essays*, Cambridge University Press 1997, p. 10.

7 Donald Senior CP and Carroll Stuhlmueller CP, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission*, London: SCM Press 1983, p. 345.

8 Pope John Paul II, Papal Encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*, Vatican Polyglot Press, Vatican City State 1990.

9 Jacques Dupuis SJ, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Maryknoll: Orbis Press 1997, p. 328.

10 Paul Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*, London: SCM Press 1985, p. 116. Maurice Wiles' analysis of the tension in Karl Rahner between the emphasis on the universal self-gift of God to the world and the unsurpassability of Jesus Christ for salvation makes the same point. It is also endorsed by Roger Haight SJ, *Jesus: Symbol of God*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1999, p. 422.

11 Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, p. 345.

12 *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Mayavati Memorial Edition, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 8 vols 1964-71, vol. 2, pp. 384f., and cited by Anantanand Rambachan, 'Swami Vivekananda: A Hindu Model for Interreligious Dialogue', *Inter-Religious Dialogue: Voices from a New Frontier*, ed. M. Darrol Bryant and Frank Flinn, New York: Paragon House 1989, p. 18.

13 Rambachan, 'Swami Vivekananda', p. 11. Also note Ninian Smart's observation in *The World's Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989, p. 395, that 'Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta also made sense of Hinduism for perhaps the first time. Now Hindus could explain the unity of their own baffling, diverse religion or religions.'

14 See his magisterial treatment of Pluralism in, John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, Basingstoke: Macmillan 1989; a shorter statement and creative defence of Pluralism against critics can be found in *The Rainbow of Faiths: Critical Dialogues on Religious Pluralism*, London: SCM Press 1995, and published as *A Christian Theology of Religions*, Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox 1995; in the context of christology, see *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, London: SCM Press 1993.

15 John Hick, 'Religious Pluralism and Salvation', *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 5, no. 4, October 1988, p. 370; reprinted in *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, p. 140.

16 See John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (eds), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, London: SCM Press and Maryknoll: Orbis Press 1987, for a range of forms of Pluralism.

17 Rita Gross, 'Religious Pluralism: Some Implications for Judaism', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* XXVI, no. 1, Winter 1989, p. 41.

18 Gross, 'Religious Pluralism', p. 39.

19 Christoph Schwöbel, 'Particularity, Universality, and the Religions', *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: the Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa, Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1990, p. 39.

20 Cf. John Hick's reply to Gavin D'Costa on the same point:

'Straightening the Record: Some Responses to Critics', *Modern Theology* 6, no. 2, January 1990.

21 S. Wesley Ariarajah, 'The Need for a New Debate', *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul F. Knitter*, ed. Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes, Maryknoll: Orbis Press 1997, p. 30.

22 The Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, *The Mystery of Salvation*, London: Church House Publishing 1995, pp. 171, 181, 184.

23 *The Mystery of Salvation*, p. 184.

24 E.g. Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, and Maryknoll: Orbis Press 2000; J. A. DiNoia OP, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective*, Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1992.

25 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, London: SPCK 1989, chapter 14; and David Lohead, *The Dialogical Imperative*, London: SCM Press 1989 and Maryknoll: Orbis Press 1988, chapter 6. From a Catholic perspective and for different reasons, Gavin D'Costa in his book, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark and Maryknoll: Orbis Press 2000 has, in my judgement, moved near to this position. I discuss D'Costa's response to Pluralism in Chapter 6.

26 Max Charlesworth, *Religious Inventions: Four Essays*, Cambridge University Press 1997, p. 50. The author acknowledges the linguistic difficulty in denoting Ultimate Reality, and he takes it to indicate any source of disclosure or revelation.

27 Charlesworth cites Paul Williams, 'Some Dimensions of the Recent Work of Raimundo Panikkar: A Buddhist Perspective', *Religious Studies* 27, 1991, p. 520.

28 Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*, New York: Harper Torchbooks 1975, p. 111.

29 See the article 'Ineffability' by John Hick, *Religious Studies* 36, 2000, pp. 35-46, for a discussion of the concept in the context of religious plurality and in the light of philosophical criticism. See also, 'The Real and Its Personae and Impersonae', *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press 1993, chapter 10, for a well-considered response to the form of the objection to Pluralism raised by Charlesworth. In his recent writings, Hick has substituted the term 'transcategorical' for 'ineffable'.

30 See his studies *One Earth Many Religions* and *Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility*, Maryknoll: Orbis Press 1996. See also John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (eds), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*.