

Religious Pluralism and Conflicting Truth Claims

The Problem of a Theology of the World Religions

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The situation of religious pluralism is not new. It has been stated correctly that each one of the world religions, of which we know at present, emerged from a situation of religious plurality and controversy.¹ What in the contemporary situation is new to some extent is that as a result of modern communication and intercultural exchange and mobility the plurality of religions and cultures has become "an experiential reality to everybody."² Even in this respect, of course, similar situations occurred in the past, for example, in the Hellenistic and Roman cultures, while in other periods, like Western medieval society, a more compact and uniform religious situation prevailed. The same was true of the Islamic societies of that period with the exception of Spain. The contemporary challenge of the Christian tradition within the West by a new religious pluralism has to be considered in the context of the historical process of the disruption of Christian unity in the West after the Reformation and of the ensuing relativization of confessional differences within Christianity under the impact of the Enlightenment. As early as in the eighteenth century the tendency to relativize differences of religious belief was extended to include other religious traditions besides Christianity, in the case of Voltaire in France or of Lessing in Germany. Thus even the attempt to turn the fact of religious pluralism into a position of dealing with religious diversities is not completely new.

What is new is that such a situation is taken seriously within the discussions of Christian theology and is felt by many theologians to challenge the foundations of what Christian doctrine has been through the centuries. An observer from the outside might be tempted to consider this phenomenon as indicating a process of erosion of the confidence of theologians in the truth of the Christian faith. To some degree such a diagnosis is probably correct, and to that extent the current discussion on a pluralistic theology of the world religions may be taken as a symptom of crisis within the modern Christian mind, especially in the West. But such an account would not enter into identifying and commenting upon the substantive issues that emerged in the process of this discussion.

The most articulate protagonist of the acceptance of religious pluralism as a systematic position in Christian theology as well as in the philosophy of religion has been John Hick.³ In 1972 Hick argued for a "Copernican revolution in theology" concerning the place of Christianity among the world religions.⁴ While he described the traditional Christian "position that salvation is through Christ alone," which he once shared himself, as "ptolemaic," because there the Christian assumes his own position or that of his church as absolute truth (as in the Ptolemaic system the position of the earth), he pleaded for a vision where all the various religions would be considered alike as planets circling around the one absolute truth.⁵ The "needed Copernican revolution in theology . . . involves a shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre to the realization that it is *God* who is at the centre, and that all the religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve around him."⁶ A pious image, the question being only how we come to know the God who stands at the center, apart from the Christian faith or from some other religious perspective. The Christian tradition affirms that it is precisely through the biblical witness and definitively through Jesus Christ that this God is known to us. It does not deny that there is some dim and provisional knowledge of God in all humankind, but even the fact that it is *this one* God who is also otherwise known in provisional ways can be stated only on the basis of his revelation in Christ. How else could we know that the adherents of other religions are related to this same God, even if they worship him under different names? The tradition of philosophical theology, of course, has claimed independent access to the true reality of God, independent from the authority of any religious tradition. Since the age of Hellenism, philosophers regarded the different religious languages about divine reality as so many mythical and metaphorical ways of talking about the one divine reality, the true nature of which is known to philosophers. There are some striking similarities in Hick's position to this tradition of natural theology and to its claim to superiority over the diverse forms of positive religion. In his case and perhaps also in the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith⁷ or of Paul Knitter,⁸ the Christian claim to superiority seems replaced by some other way of knowing

about the one God or the absolute to whom all the different ways of human religion are related.

Yet Hick claims to argue on the basis of Christian theology itself. It is on this basis that he rejects the "ptolemaic" self-centeredness or what more recently he calls Christian "exclusivism," but also surpasses the more broad-minded view of Christian "inclusivism" in order to embrace the position of "pluralism."⁹ If his criticism were only directed against the exclusivist view that there can be no salvation outside the Christian church, agreement would be more easily obtained. Though Hick reports himself to have been raised within such a very restricted view,¹⁰ he seems correct in his later observation that "Christian exclusivism has now largely faded out from the 'mainline' churches, but is still powerful in many of the 'marginal' fundamentalistic sects."¹¹ More important, however, Hick offers a convincing argument against such a narrow exclusivism. In view of the fact that "the large majority of the human race who have lived and died up to the present moment have lived either before Christ or outside the borders of Christendom," he puts the question: "Can we then accept the conclusion that the God of love who seeks to save all mankind has nevertheless ordained that men must be saved in such a way that only a small minority can in fact receive this salvation?"¹² It is clear that we cannot. It is equally clear, moreover, that the proclamation of Jesus as transmitted in the gospel tradition does not support such a narrow ecclesiocentrism. Jesus anticipated that people from all nations will participate in the future of God's kingdom. For he said: "People will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God" (Lk 13:29). And Matthew's version adds that at the same time "the sons of the kingdom," that is, members of the chosen people of God, will be excluded from participation. Equally universal is the outlook in the parable of the Last Judgment, when it is said that many will be admitted to the kingdom on the basis of their works although they did not know Jesus (Mt 25,40). This parable has often been interpreted as referring to believers who did not recognize that it was Christ whom they benefitted in their charitable works. But there is no basis in the wording to justify such a restrictive exegesis. To the contrary, the general expectation was that all human individuals will have to face the eschatological judge. And this is the situation presupposed in the parable.

The parable of the last judgment does also imply, however, that Jesus and his proclamation are the final norm in deciding on whether a person will be admitted to or excluded from the communion of the kingdom. He is the norm even in relation to those who never knew him in their lifetime. The conclusion is that many do in fact belong to Jesus and in the kingdom he proclaimed who were not members of the Chosen People of Israel or of the Christian church. But it is the affinity of their lives to Jesus' mission and proclamation that will prove decisive in their eternal salvation. Thus Jesus remains the final criterion for all human beings, while only the members of his church know about this criterion and can be certain about their

salvation providing they live according to their faith.

This is the line of Christian inclusivism, which, however, does not satisfy John Hick and other proponents of a pluralist position, because they want to look upon all the world religions as equally valid instruments of salvation. It is at this point that the real issue of the debate emerges. What are the reasons to consider the position of Christian inclusivism inadequate? Here the reason can no longer be the argument that the majority of human individuals are not given a chance to participate in salvation. According to the inclusivist position, human persons from all cultures can be spiritually close to the kingdom Jesus proclaimed without even knowing about Jesus. There must be other reasons, then, to consider the inclusivist position inadequate.

According to John Hick, the more inclusivist interpretations of the Christocentric absolutism of traditional Christian theology "only amount to epicycles added to a fundamentally absolutist structure of theory in order to obscure its incompatibility with the observed facts."¹³ The image of epicycles carries the connotation of artificial attempts that were once designed to improve the consonance of ptolemaic astronomy with observed facts before the Copernican system provided a simpler and more consistent description. It is the addition of subsidiary hypotheses in order to save a weak theory from the verdict of having been falsified by experience. But does this image apply to Christian inclusivism with regard to participation of people from other cultures in salvation? I cannot see that it does. Neither is the inclusivist "theory" artificially complicated as compared to the exclusivist principle of "no salvation outside the church," nor was it a later invention for the purpose of repairing specific shortcomings of that principle. The inclusivist conception was established theologically in the second century by Justinus's idea that some "germs" of the divine Logos have been dispersed everywhere in human history, while the full Logos appeared only in Jesus Christ. At the same time, the theologoumenon of Christ's descent to the realm of the dead¹⁴ after his own death on the cross was related to the rescue of Adam, who was not only considered the first human being, but also the embodiment of the entire human race. The subject was to become a prominent theme in Christian iconography. But the principle of Christian inclusivism goes back to Jesus' own teaching, as I indicated before. Thus the exclusivism of "no salvation outside the church" looks more like a later constriction imposed upon an originally broader attitude.

This original attitude was not yet narrowed down in the famous sentence from Acts and attributed to Peter, that "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). This sentence does not say that persons who never knew Jesus have no chance to participate in the kingdom to come. It does say that salvation is accessible through Jesus now as it is nowhere else, and it does imply that in the case of personal encounter with that message one's own chance of being saved is at stake. Taken in isolation, it could later on easily be interpreted in the

sense of "no salvation outside the church," but if that were what the sentence intended, Luke in Acts would contradict himself when he lets Paul proclaim in Athens: "The times of ignorance God overlooked . . ." (Acts 17:30). The sentence that there is no other name by which we must be saved may rather be given an inclusive interpretation: Even in the case of those who will participate in the kingdom of God without having encountered Jesus in their earthly life, Jesus will be their savior, no matter what form of religion they were following.

The real problem Hick has with Christian inclusivism is only subsequently addressed by him, the problem of Christology. It is not mentioned in connection with the critique of the inclusivist position, but afterward in terms of a consequence resulting from the pluralist alternative: There must be a "rethinking of the doctrine of the Incarnation" and a special form of such rethinking that "no longer necessarily involves the claim to the unique superiority of Christianity which the more traditional understanding involved."¹⁵ Hick assumes that such a rethinking of the incarnation did in fact take place in recent work on Christology. But in order to produce evidence for that statement, he has to be very selective in his references to Christological literature. Of course, if Jesus is to be understood as the incarnate son of God, then the claim to Christian uniqueness is inevitable. Therefore, Hick's proposal of religious pluralism as an option of authentically Christian theology hinges on the condition of a prior demolition of the traditional doctrine of the incarnation.

At this point Hick's case for religious pluralism as an option of Christian theology is closely related to his involvement in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Christ-without-Myth) debate. Although it is not possible in this context to comment on that debate extensively, I may say that I concur with Hick in his remark that this debate brought "the cat of historical criticism" into the British discussions on Christology.¹⁶ In Germany this had been done much earlier, and the way the proponents of the view that incarnational language was "mythical" opposed that language to the historical Jesus, strongly reminds a German reader of the old liberal theology of Harnack and others who sharply opposed Paul to Jesus in order to opt for Jesus' own faith in the Father alone in contrast to Paul's faith in the Son. The quest for the thread of continuity that nevertheless leads from Jesus to the apostolic proclamation of Christ has not yet been examined by the proponents of the *Christ-without-Myth*-conception.¹⁷ But it is this question that occupied the exegetical and theological discussion since Bultmann. In fact, Jesus' emphasis on the anticipatory presence of God's kingdom in his own activity (Lk 11:20) involved his person in a way that essentially implies what later on was explicated by incarnational language and by titles like Son of God.¹⁸ But then, the uniqueness attributed to Jesus by the incarnational theology of the church was already characteristic of his own eschatological message and activity. Since the impending future of God was becoming present through him, there is no room for other approaches to salvation

besides him. Those who relegate the claim to uniqueness to the "deification" of Jesus in later Christian interpretation do not take seriously the eschatological finality claimed by Jesus himself.

Underlying the bifurcation between Jesus' own activity and the earliest experience of him on the part of his disciples on the one hand and Christological language on the other, is Hick's distinction between first and second order interpretation in his description of religious experience.¹⁹ While there is no experience without interpretation ("seeing-as"), second order interpretation on the level of theological reflection is another matter. According to Hick, there was a first order religious experience of "the presence of God" in Jesus. Elsewhere he called it "the Christ event,"²⁰ which formed the starting point of the Christological interpretations of the church, but which must not be confused with any one of them. However, at this point a critical note is necessary: The presence of God in Jesus was not first a matter of Christian experience, but a claim of Jesus himself and this claim involved eschatological finality. It is this claim that lies at the roots of the incarnational Christology that was developed in the church. The Christian claim to uniqueness is not based on any Christian experience. If this were so, it would be fair to argue that there are other experiences of uniqueness within the world religions. But the claim to uniqueness concerning the person of Jesus is bound up with his own eschatological message, especially with the eschatological finality of God's kingdom as becoming present in his activity.

This leads to another critical note, this time regarding Hick's use of the term *salvation*. In his interpretation, this term is related to Christian experience as it can be obtained in the present situation of the Christian. If salvation is taken to refer to some "actual transformation of human life from self-centredness to Reality-centredness,"²¹ then there is no reason to deny that such transformation occurs in various cultures and in many forms of authentic religious experience. But this is not the New Testament concept of salvation. It is easy to check that there "salvation" was understood with reference to the eschatological judgment of God and to participation in the communion of his kingdom. This is true of the Jesus tradition (Mk 8:35 and 10:26; Lk 13:23) as well as of Paul.²² The idea need not be restricted to a juridical act in the sense described by Hick as alternative to his own view, but it belongs to the dimension of eschatological belief rather than to present experience. As such it is bound up with the truth of Jesus' claim to eschatological finality (see Lk 12:8 and parallels).

Hick has been criticized for disregarding the question of truth in his proposal for a theology of religious pluralism, and especially for playing down the fact that different religions make conflicting truth claims.²³ He responded that this amounts to a caricature of his position. But in fact his response tends to confirm the essence of that criticism. While he does not deny that there are disagreements on various levels among people of different religions, concerning matters of historical belief as well as with

regard to doctrines like the one on reincarnation and finally also on different ways of conceiving and experiencing the ultimate reality as personal or non-personal, he nevertheless holds that the issues where "the conflicting truth claims of the different traditions occur . . . are not of *great religious*, i.e. soteriological, importance," though he admits their metaphysical importance.²⁴ The identification of religious and soteriological importance, however, brings us back to the idea of salvation as presently available experience of transformation. According to Hick, "doctrines are secondary, and yet essential to the vital matter of receiving salvation, somewhat as packaging and labelling are secondary and yet essential to transmitting the contents of a parcel."²⁵ All this, of course, means that truth questions get relativized: They are "not of *great religious* . . . importance." The only important thing seems to be the experience of salvation in the encounter with absolute reality. If so much is granted, then of course Hick is correct: "When I meet a devout Jew, or Muslim, or Sikh, or Hindu, or Buddhist in whom the fruits of openness to the divine reality are gloriously evident, I cannot realistically regard the Christian experience of the divine as authentic and their non-Christian experiences as inauthentic."²⁶ If everything comes down to human experiences, then the obvious conclusion is to treat them all on the same level as so many "varied human responses to a transcendent divine Reality."²⁷ But unfortunately, the notion of salvation as presently available in terms of experiential transformation does not square with the biblical evidence. It has no basis in the New Testament usage of the term. When Jesus affirmed the presence of the kingdom in his exorcistic activity (Lk 11:20), the point was not so much the occurrence of exorcism as such, for there were other exorcists besides him. The point was that the exorcism was related to his message of the imminence of the kingdom and of its priority over all other concerns as well as to the faithful acceptance of that message. It claims that God is not some transcendent reality which human beings may experience and respond to in different ways. Rather, the claim is that the transcendent God is present in Jesus' activity and that the appropriate response can only be faith. It is the truth of this message that is decisive "soteriologically." And that truth depends on God's vindication of the claim involved in Jesus' activity, a vindication that the disciples discerned in the Easter appearances of their Lord, that, however, remains dependent on the final future of God.

Considering the specific character of the Christian faith as based upon a historical past and related to an eschatological future of salvation, the truth claims of the Christian proclamation are at its basis, and the differences with other religions finally result from conflicting truth claims. A theology of the world religions that wants to be true to the empirical situation in the way the religious traditions confront each other must not evade or play down the conflict of truth claims. If we look to the history of religions in the past, there was always competition and struggle for superiority on the basis of different truth claims. Although claims of this broad

kind cannot be easily judged once for all, they nevertheless admit provisional judgment in terms of whether a religious tradition continues to illumine the life of its adherents in the context of their world. In the case of encounter or confrontation between different religious cultures (or sometimes between different religious strands within one and the same culture) this means, whether a particular tradition proves superior in illuminating the peoples' experiences of their life and world. The great changes in the history of religions can largely be accounted for in this way.²⁸ It is the encounter of conflicting truth claims that challenges each religious tradition to reaffirm itself in facing those challenges. That means to incorporate whatever one has to recognize as elements of truth in other traditions into one's own faith. But it can never mean to give up on the specific truth claims of one's own tradition. If that happens, it would precipitate the end of that religious tradition. Therefore, the advice of some promoters of a theology of religious pluralism to relativize and play down the Christian truth claims could prove disastrous. In order to engage in genuine inter-religious dialogue, Christianity should deal with the situation of religious pluralism in a different way. It must be open and ready to accept whatever truth the Christian can accept and learn from other religious traditions in order to incorporate those elements of truth into our own understanding of God and of his revelation. But that does not require relativizing the claim of the Christian faith to eschatological finality. Rather, this claim should produce an awareness of the provisional character of our present experience and knowledge to the effect that the Christian should be enabled to recognize his or her need for deeper insight, not least in a situation of encounter with other religious traditions.

In dialogue with people from other religious traditions as well as in his or her own theology the Christian may recognize the face of Christ in some of the persons who follow other ways of religion. The Christian may also recognize the work of God's providence in their lives and in the developments of their own tradition. This does not necessarily involve that those other persons be able to recognize that in their turn. If they did they might become baptized. As long as that does not occur, the situation of religious dialogue, as viewed from the Christian perspective, remains somewhat ambiguous. When a Hindu or Sikh prays to God, how can we know that in his intention it is the same God we worship? Even in the case of a pious Muslim this is not clear, because his way of turning to God is informed by his belief in Muhammad, although in part we share the same "cumulative tradition." Is it nevertheless the same God? This is a question to be decided by God, not us. The same is true with regard to the religious life of the followers of those other ways. As Christians we can recognize with deep respect that many of them take the demands of their own tradition more seriously than many Christians do. But does the religious transformation of their lives positively correspond to what the Christian hopes for as eschatological transformation of our bodies by participation in the glory of God?

There may be many forms of religious transformation, and some may look more similar to what we hope for than they are. Human experiences of salvation are as ambiguous as other human experiences. It all depends on whether there is communion with God, the God of Israel and of Jesus. Such communion is promised to Christians, provided they do not desert their faith. But even as they continue in faith they are assured of such communion in Christ in whom they trust, not in themselves as they can be looked upon in abstraction from Christ. When it comes to the basis of our Christian confidence in our future salvation, if the spiritual life that Christians experience among themselves remains ambiguous, how could it be less ambiguous in the case of the non-Christians? We may hope that God will look graciously upon them as we hope for ourselves. But one difference remains: The Christian has the promise of God in Christ. The other religious traditions do not provide that particular promise.

NOTES

1. H. Coward, *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions* (1985).
2. M. Seckler, "Theologie der Religionen mit Fragezeichen," *Theologische Quartalsschrift* 166 (1986), p. 168.
3. See Hick and Knitter. *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* signals the extent to which a number of important Christian theologians have suggested a similar paradigm change in the Christian theology of religions.
4. John Hick, "Copernican Revolution of Theology," in *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (1973), pp. 120-32.
5. *Ibid.* pp. 121, 124f.
6. *Ibid.* p. 131.
7. See, for example, W. C. Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (1981). In this book it is not always clear whether Smith is himself conscious of starting (not only personally but methodologically) from the Christian knowledge of God and going on to an awareness of the same God in all human history of religion—"seeing Christ's face in all human persons" (W. C. Smith, "Theology and the World's Religious History," in *Towards a Universal Theology of Religion*, ed. L. Swidler [1987], p. 66)—or whether he claims a knowledge of the one "transcendent reality" (p. 62) independent of the different cumulative traditions. His assertion that "at first" he starts to interpret other cultures from his Western Christian perspective, but "less so in the end" (p. 63) remains ambiguous as to whether the comparative study of religions ends up in providing a completely independent evidence of the unity and sameness of the "transcendent reality" they point to or whether it merely confirms that the God of the Bible is also recognizable in other forms of "faith." The second I could sympathize with, while the first seems illusive, even if we postulate a "universal, corporate, critical self-consciousness" of human beings across the barriers of cultural differences (*Towards a World Theology*, p. 60).
8. Knitter, *No Other Name?*. Knitter presents and favors the position of Hick and others as a "theocentric" model (p. 145ff.) over against the ecclesiocentric or Christocentric models of the tradition (esp. pp. 166f.).
9. J. Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (1985), pp. 31ff. A few years earlier

Race used the same typology of positions. See Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*.

10. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, pp. 121f.

11. Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 32.

12. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 122.

13. Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 52. See the earlier, more extended discussion of this subject in Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, pp. 123ff. Here the reader more easily understands how Hick arrives at this judgment, because there his argument relates primarily to modern Roman Catholic revisions of the old principle of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.

14. Hick (in *God and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 129) quotes my comments on this issue (Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (1967), p. 272) among his evidence of “a Protestant epicycle.” Whatever the meaning of 1 Peter 4:6, my own remarks on the issue do not favor the idea of “a second chance” of conversion after death (Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 130), but that of an “unconscious participation” of human persons from former generations in the salvation brought about by Jesus Christ. In substance the idea is close to what I said here with reference to Luke 13:29 and Matthew 25:40.

15. Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 53, 62.

16. Ibid. p. 13.

17. Even a theologian as sympathetic to Hick’s proposal as Paul F. Knitter expressed reservations at this point. See Knitter, *No Other Name?*, p. 174.

18. This continuity between Jesus and early Christology is a central issue in Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*.

19. Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 23f; see also Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 172ff., 372ff.

20. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, pp. 111ff.

21. Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 32; cf. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, pp. 301ff.

22. See W. Foerster’s article in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* 7, ed. G. Friedrich (1964), pp. 981-1022, esp. 991ff.

23. P. Griffiths and D. Lewis, “On Grading Religions, Seeking Truth, and Being Nice to People,” *Religious Studies* 19 (1983), pp. 75-80. Hick responded in his article “On Conflicting Religious Truth-Claims,” now in Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 88-95.

24. Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 93f; cf. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, pp. 362-76.

25. Ibid. p. 46.

26. Ibid. p. 91.

27. Ibid. p. 92.

28. I repeatedly proposed this idea as a key for a methodological approach toward a theological interpretation of the history of the religions. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (1976), pp. 310ff.; idem, *Systematische Theologie* 1 (1988), pp. 167-88; and idem, “Die Religionen als Thema der Theologie,” *Theologische Quartalsschrift* 169 (1989), pp. 99-110, esp. pp. 104ff.). In many ways the procedure I envision corresponds with W. C. Smith’s project of a theology of religion. I agree with him that the history of the religions has to be the subject matter of such a study. I further agree that the question of revelation is a historical question, a “history-of-religion question” (see Smith, “Idolatry,” p. 59)