



Review of "The Myth of Christian Uniqueness", ed. by John Hick and Paul Knitter

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*The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* eds. John Hick and Paul Knitter. London: SCM Press, and Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books. 1988, 227pp.

Twelve theologians who shared in a conference in California present their conviction of the need for a new move in Christian perceptions of other faiths, beyond exclusivism (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus* – outside the church there is no salvation), and inclusivism (non-Christians may be saved through Christ), to pluralism. To put it in broad terms, they proceed from the following points of departure: even a generous inclusivism still makes unique claims for Jesus, and such claims are imperialistic. The further move must be made, the "crossing of the Rubicon" to the recognition that neither Jesus nor Christianity is uniquely salvific. We have to move from a Ptolomaic cosmology ("my religion is the centre"), through a Copernican ("God is the centre") to the realization (that the only centre is the universal human search for and experience of salvation.

Three bridges are proposed for the crossing of the Rubicon. The first, "historical-cultural", uses the sociology of knowledge to remind us that all religions are the product of human creativity developed in specific cultural situations (Kaufman, Hick, Gilkey). The second ("theological-mystical") explores the unities among all the religions (Cantwell Smith, Samartha, Panikkar, Yagi). The third ("ethico-practical") affirms justice as the criterion by which all religions are to be evaluated (Ruelher, Suchocki, Pieris, Knitter).

It would need a large volume to respond adequately to these essays. I shall attempt only a brief inspection of the three "bridges" and then offer some remarks on the enterprise as a whole. Kaufman rightly sees "modern historical consciousness" as relativizing all truth claims. But of course this consciousness is itself a culture-product and can claim no epistemological privilege. Is there any escape from total relativism? Gilkey, the most profound of the writers, sees the

appalling danger that this opens up. He alone recognizes the "demonic" possibilities of pluralism. How, he asks, does a pluralist society cope with a phenomenon like Hitler? The answer is that in such situations we need an absolute. But what is the status of an "absolute" which is normally dormant but "on call", and available when required? Faced with the paradox of a "relative absolute", Gilkey answers by saying that while it is insoluble in theory it can be solved by reference to the "venerable American practical tradition" (p.46). We act for justice now, and then reflect. This bridge therefore does not stand by itself; it depends upon the "ethico-practical" bridge to which I will come.

In the second river-crossing exercise, Cantwell Smith develops his well-known argument that there is no such thing as "idolatry" in the pejorative, biblical sense, since all human worship is a response to the Transcendent, however He, She or It may be conceived. The error lies in confusing the image with the reality. It follows that "for Christians to think that Christianity is true, or final, or salvific is a form of idolatry" (p.59). So also Samartha: "Although each response to Mystery has a normative claim on the followers of that particular tradition, the criteria derived from one response cannot be made the norm to judge the responses of other traditions" (p.76). There are indeed no criteria by which truth in these matters can be assessed. We are in a sea of pure subjectivity

In the third section (the "ethico-practical") a serious effort is made to escape from this total relativism. There is a criterion, not a theoretical but a practical one. It is to be found in the practice of justice, justice for women oppressed by men, for the poor oppressed by the rich. Bill this proposal raises of least two problems. Firstly, it is notorious that the de



mand for justice is precisely what fuels war, since, in the absence of a Judge, each of us is judge in our own cause. It is part of the corruption of human nature that we overestimate what is due to ourselves. The uniqueness of the gospel is that it affirms a justice which is the gift of God through God's own acceptance of the cost of our injustice. The justice of God, set forth as part of real history in the crucifixion of Jesus, relativizes our rival claims for justice and cleanses them of the fanaticism that follows when my justice becomes an absolute.

The second difficulty with this "ethicopractical criterion" is this. If no firm statements are permitted about the ultimate Mystery, what ontological ground is there for the "option for the poor"? In his final essay, Tom Driver embraces what is, in effect, a frank polytheism. "There are other 'salvation histories' outside [Christianity]; and in them God has different names, different identities and moves in different ways. Inasmuch as God has different histories, then God has different natures" (p.212). Who, then, is to question the man who worships a white male god with an option for the rich? And if Darwin is right, is it not more sensible to acknowledge that it is precisely the "poor" who are not fitted to survive in the struggle for existence? An unprejudiced survey of world affairs does not suggest that God is on the side of the poor.

The "Rubicon" enterprise proposed in this book raises four kinds of questions for this reader.

*Epistemological:* It is of course true that all claims to know something are culturally conditioned. But it does not follow that we can know nothing, and that claims to know something of the truth can be dismissed as exercises in subjectivity. Throughout this book the idea that there might be one truth about God is dismissed as imperialistic. I am struck by the contrast between this and the passionate search of the physical scientists to find a unified theory that would give coherence to our knowledge of the natural world. This volume signals the abandonment of the search for ultimate truth: there is no truth, no coherent cosmos to be explored and mapped; there is only subjective experience. It is the voice of a culture which has lost its nerve.

*Political and cultural:* The writers effectively identify Christianity with Western imperial power. They have not come to terms with the present reality, which is that Christianity has long

ceased to be the public doctrine of the Western world and that the present vigorous expansion of Christianity *is the work of people who bear witness from positions of economic and political weakness.*

*Psychological:* Some of these Christian writers portray Christianity as an evil force in human history. They express revulsion against the religion by which they were formed. Have guilt and anger for the sins of Western nations overwhelmed sober theological judgment? This is a situation in which rational argument is difficult.

*Theological:* The possibility that truth might be revealed having been eliminated, attention is concentrated on the self and its need of salvation. If it is true that "God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son", then the centre of attention is God and his glory, and the central concern is worship. But this is excluded *in limine*, and therefore the only centre is the self and its need. The move from a Christocentric view to the "soteriocentric" view recommended here is a shift from reality-centredness to self-centredness, a sort of reverse conversion (see Hick, p.23). There is a traditional name for this move.

I fear that the Rubicon has not been crossed. The bridges do not hold. The travellers have been swept away in the powerful currents of modernity, out to that sea of subjectivity where there are no landmarks. The future will belong to those (of many faiths) who believe that it is possible, even if only in part, to know and confess the truth, and that to seek to do so is the noblest adventure offered to human beings.

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