



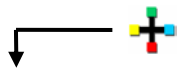
Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ

1989

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In his 1987 Lambeth Lecture on "Religious Pluralism and Its Challenge to Christian Theology," the director of the World Council of Churches unit on interfaith dialogue, Wesley Ariarajah, speaks of "a current ... about to become a flood," exercising an overwhelming pressure on people of all religions to "become aware of and to cope with a religiously plural world."¹ That pressure has already led a group of well-known Christians to announce – under the title *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* – their conclusion that the claim for uniqueness must be abandoned.² The July 1988 issue of the *International Review of Mission* (IRM), containing addresses and discussions centering on the celebration of the jubilee of the 1938 Tambaram Conference, gives further evidence of the power of this current.³ It is fed, of course, not only by arguments that are, properly speaking, theological and philosophical, but also by the pervading feeling of guilt in the world of Western Christendom, and by the overwhelming sense of need to find a basis for human unity in an age of nuclear weapons. As always, there is a strong temptation to go with the current, but even a small acquaintance with history is enough to remind us that what seem to be overwhelmingly powerful movements of thought can lead to disaster. Critical reflection is in order.

No persons in their senses deny the need for human unity. Our world is in fact torn apart by rival programs for human unity. Washington and Moscow are both convinced that we need one world. Many years ago Andre Dumas drew attention to the obvious fact that any proposal for human unity that does not specify the center around which unity is to be constructed has as its hidden center the interests of the proposer. The Myth of Christian Uniqueness provides rich

¹ S. Wesley Ariarajah, "Religious Plurality and Its Challenge to Christian Theology," *World Faiths Insight* (London), June 1988, pp. 2-3. Ariarajah is quoting from Wilfred Cantwell Smith.

² John Hick and Paul F Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1987).

³ All quotations from the *International Review of Mission* (IRM) cited in the text of this article are from the July 1988 issue.

illustration of this. Gordon Kaufman in his essay starts from the need for human unity and takes it for granted, without argument, that the Christian gospel cannot provide the center. He goes on to say that "modern historical consciousness" requires us to abandon the claim to Christ's uniqueness and to recognize that the biblical view of things, like all other views, is the product of a particular culture (pp. 5-6). It is of course true that the biblical view of things is culturally conditioned: that does not require us to say that it is not true. "Modern historical consciousness" is also a culturally conditioned phenomenon and does not provide us with a standpoint from which we can dispose of the truth-claims of the Bible. Recognition of the culturally conditioned character of all truth-claims could lead to the abandonment of all belief in the possibility of knowing the truth; that is what is happening in contemporary Western culture. But this recognition provides no grounds upon which it is possible to deny that God might have acted decisively to reveal and effect the divine purpose for human history; and such a revelation would, of course, have to be culturally conditioned, since otherwise it would not be part of human history and could have no impact on human history. There are certainly no grounds whatever for supposing that "modern historical consciousness" provides us with an epistemological privilege denied to other culturally conditioned ways of seeing.

As Alasdair MacIntyre so brilliantly documents in his book *Whose Justice, What Rationality?*⁴ the idea that there can be a kind of reason that is supra-cultural and that would enable us to view all the culturally conditioned traditions of rationality from a standpoint above them all is one of the illusions of our contemporary culture. All rationality is socially embodied, developed in human tradition and using some human language. The fact that biblical thought shares this with all other forms of human thought in no way disqualifies it from providing the needed center.

The authors of *The Myth* would go some way to accept this. For Paul Knitter, "Pluralism seems to be of the very stuff of reality, the way things are, the way they function.... There can never be just one of anything."⁵ So there are no absolute values given to us; we must create them, but this must be a collective enterprise in which we all share. In similar vein Stanley Samartha calls upon Christians to contribute "to the pool of human values such as justice and compassion, truth and righteousness in the quest of different people for spiritual and moral values ... to hold together different religions, cultures, languages and ethnic groups" (*IRM*, p. 323) and that "to claim that one religious tradition has the only answer to such a global problem [as the nuclear threat] sounds preposterous" (*IRM*, p. 315).

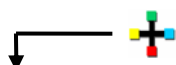
These and similar statements bring us, I think, to the heart of our matter, revealing as they do that loss of faith in the possibility of knowing objective truth, which is at the heart of the sickness of our culture. In the first place it is, of course, not true that the modern worldview of physics removes all absolutes. There are such absolutes as the speed of light and the value of Planck's constant. One might well say that it seems preposterous that these figures should be just so, no more and no less; but it is so. These are what we call in our culture "facts," about which we are not pluralists. It is in the realm of "values" that we are pluralists. Values are matters of personal choice; they are what people want. And human wants conflict. The idea of contributing to a shared pool of "values" conveys no coherent meaning. The question that has always to be addressed, surely, is the question about the facts, the question "What is the case?"— and on that question some answers will be true and others false. Rational people will see to it that their "values" are based upon what is the case, upon reality. "Values" that are not so based are merely personal wishes, and human wishes collide. It is precisely for "justice" that nations go to war.

The course of the present debate has illustrated the retreat from objectivity into subjectivity of which I speak. In his wellknown use of the Copernican paradigm, John Hick advised us that we should learn to see God as the center of all reality, and abandon our culture-bound vision of Jesus as the center. Paul Knitter and others now suggest a further move, beyond a Christocentric and

⁴ Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1988.

⁵ *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1985), p. 6.

even a theocentric view to one that might be called soteriocentric – for why indeed should belief in God be the clue to reality? Thus Christopher Duraisingh writes: "It is not through our a priori doctrinal formulations on God or Christ, but rather through our collective human search for meaning and sacredness that the 'universe of faiths' could be adequately understood," and he goes on therefore to say, in agreement with Paul Knitter, that our approach to other faiths must be neither theocentric nor Christocentric, but must start from soteriology (*IRM*, p. 399). In Paul Knitter's words, interfaith dialogue "should not revolve



around 'Christ' (or Buddha or Krishna), or around 'God' (or Brahman or Nirvana) but around 'salvation'-that is, a shared concern about and effort to remove the sufferings that rack the human family today" (*IRM*, p. 399).

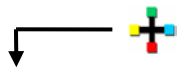
The movement that Knitter and Duraisingh propose is indeed a natural extension of the movement initiated by Hick. He asked us to move from Jesus – the name of a man about whom there are historical records that can be read and probed and analyzed – to God, a name that has almost as many meanings as there are human beings. "God" as the center means not God as revealed in Jesus or in the Qur'an or in any other specific religious tradition but "God" as I understand God. It is a move from the objective to the subjective. The further move is natural-the move to my own search for wholeness, a search that is surely in some sense different for every human being. Hick in several places speaks of true religion as being turned from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness; but this is a move in the opposite direction, from objective reality to the self and its needs.

One might bring out the point by placing Copernicus in his historical context. Ptolemy's way of understanding the solar system had endured for 1,500 years. During that period it enabled astronomers to predict eclipses, cartographers to make accurate maps, and explorers to sail to far destinations. It satisfied human need for a very long time. When Copernicus proposed his alternative view, there was a debate (not then called "dialogue"), which lasted for many decades. It was not, of course, a debate between "science" and "religion"-an absurdly anachronistic portrayal of the matter. It was a debate within a society that had not yet relegated "facts" to a domain outside theology. It was a hotly argued discussion. In the end it was decided: Copernicus was right; Ptolemy – useful as he had been for so many centuries – was wrong. The suggestion that the argument might be ended by agreeing that there is a common search for truth or that the different views should be "pooled" would not have been accepted. And rightly so, because there was a concern for truth and a belief that it could be known.

I make this point (which I owe to Harold Turner) to illuminate what seems to me to be the central issue in this whole debate; it is the abandonment of the belief that it is possible to know the truth. There is indeed an ancient and venerable tradition that tells us that ultimate reality is unknowable. It is true that the human mind cannot comprehend God. But this true statement can be used, and is used, to disqualify any firm affirmation of truth. The true statement that we cannot know everything can be used to disqualify a valid claim to know something. The human mind cannot comprehend God, but we have no grounds for denying the possibility that God might make the divine known to human beings and that they might legitimately bear witness to what has been revealed to them.

And, of course, the writers whom I am criticizing would reply: "Yes indeed, but God has revealed God's self in many ways. Therefore, there are many gospels and many missions." I do indeed believe and am firmly convinced that there is no human being in whose mind and conscience there is not some whisper of God's word, and I have known many non-Christians who have a deep and often radiant sense of the presence of God. But I also know that many evil and horrible things are done in the name of religion and in the name of God. Does a claim to have a mission from God exempt the one who makes it from critical questioning? And if there are to be questions, where do we find the criteria? Diana Eck, moderator of the WCC's Dialogue Unit, is

severely critical of Hendrik Kraemer because he presumed to discuss the question of whether and how God reveals the divine to a Muslim; for the answer to that question, she says, we must go to the



Muslim (*IRM*, p. 382). But does that apply to all those who claim to have a mission from God? Hitler, for one, was certain that he had a mission from God; do we take his word for it? If not, on what grounds do we deny his testimony? When Christians do evil things in the name of God, as they do, we can confront them with the figure of Christ in the Gospels and require them to measure their actions and motives against that given reality. But if it is denied that there is any such divinely given standard available to us as a part of our human history, what grounds are there for passing a judgment that is more than *ad hominem*?

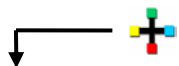
This is not a merely rhetorical question. In *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* one writer faces up to it. Langdon Gilkey asks the question: How, in a pluralist world, do we respond to a phenomenon like Hitler? His answer is interesting. He says that for such situations we need an absolute; only something like the Barmen Declaration is an adequate response. But the necessity for this absolute is a relative one. Gilkey's key sentence is: "paradoxically, plurality, precisely by its own ambiguity, implies both relativity and absoluteness, a juxtaposition or synthesis of the relative and the absolute that is frustrating intellectually and yet necessary practically" (pp. 45-46). Gilkey endeavors to cope with the intellectual "frustration" by appealing to "the venerable, practical American tradition" of pragmatism, and I confess I am simply unable to follow him. He is, of course, profoundly right in drawing attention to what he calls the demonic possibilities of pluralism. But I remain totally unconvinced by the idea of an absolute that is available on call when it is relatively necessary.

The point is that we do not need to go back to Hitler to find evidence for the demonic possibilities of pluralism. We surely know that our contemporary Western culture is in the power of false gods, of idols; that people are seeking salvation through the invocation of all the old gods of power and sex and money -- "star wars," the "nuclear shield," the free market, the consumer society. There will come a point, perhaps not far in the future, when Christians will realize that something like the Barmen Declaration is needed. What deeply troubles me about the contemporary output of the "interfaith industry" is that it is destroying the only basis on which such a declaration could be made. There is certainly a common search for salvation; it is that search that tears the world to pieces when it is directed to that which is not God.

But Wilfrid Cantwell Smith says that there is no such thing as idolatry. In *The Myth* volume he restates his familiar view that all the religions have as their common core some experience of the transcendent; that whether we speak of images made of wood or stone, or images in the human mind, or even of Jesus himself, all are the means used by the transcendent to make himself or herself or itself present to us humans. To claim uniqueness for one particular form or vehicle of this contact with the transcendent is preposterous and blasphemous. Much rather accept the truth so beautifully stated in the Bhagavadgita and in the theology of Ramanuja, that God is so gracious that he (or she or it) accepts all worship whatever be the form through which the worship is offered. Here clearly "the transcendent" is a purely formal category into which one can put any content that the mind can devise. Once again it is clear that we are in the world of pure subjectivity. There can be no such thing as false worship because no objective reality is involved. The question "True or false?" simply does not arise. We are witnessing the collapse of the whole glorious human enterprise of seeking to know the truth, to make contact with reality, to know God as God truly is. It is the mark of a culture that-in the words that Gilbert Murray used to describe the end of the glorious civilization of Greece-has lost its nerve. We are in the midst of a dying culture.

When the Greeks, worshipping "an unknown God," were confronted by a not very impressive man (see 2 Cor. 10:10) who told them, "What you worship as unknown, that I proclaim to you," they were naturally inclined to laugh. And of course God was not wholly unknown, otherwise there would have been no altar. And if God had been truly known, there would have been no need for many altars to many gods. God has indeed made the divine known in some way and in some measure to all human beings. Why, then, speak of one unique revelation? Eck tells us that her Hindu teacher was astonished to learn that Christians acknowledge only one avatar, and she goes on to say that while some Christians believe this, to many other Christians it is folly (*IRM*, p. 384). With Cantwell Smith, she deplores the idea that God's revelation is locked away in the past, and she quotes Smith as writing, "God is not revealed fully in Jesus Christ to me, nor indeed to anyone that I have met; or that my historical studies have uncovered" (*ibid*). Now surely every Christian must confess that he or she has not fully grasped the length and breadth and height and depth of God's revelation in Jesus, and is seeking to comprehend more. Truly God makes the divine known in the soul and conscience and reason of the human person, but not in a purely inward spirituality, which is separate from the public history that we share. The Hindu can speak of many avatars, because none of them is part of public history; they are all ideas in the mind. There is no event in public history that can or could replace those events that we confess to have taken place under Pontius Pilate. It is because of those events that we can recognize and rejoice in the intimations of God's presence in the experience of men and women of many religious traditions and (especially!) men and women who make no religious profession. What is here in question is not merely an inward experience of "the transcendent" but a series of events in public history by which the human situation is decisively changed. We enter into and grow into the inward experience of God's love and truth through participating in the rational discourse of the community that takes its rise from these events. This tradition of rational discourse enables us to find in these events not only the source of a growing inward experience of God, but also the clue by following which we are enabled to make sense of the world, to grasp its real nature with growing (though always very partial) sureness.

Of course, it is always possible to deny that these events have this significance. One might almost say that it is normal to deny it. There are no external proofs by which it could be shown to be indubitable. But every form of rationality or of spirituality is socially embodied in a particular tradition and language, and rests ultimately upon presuppositions that cannot be verified by reference to some reality external to it. The idea that the universe is so constructed that we can enjoy indubitable knowledge without the risks of personal commitment is an illusion, but this illusion is used to discredit the claims of a specific tradition of rationality such as is embodied in the Christian community. "True knowledge," says Paul Knitter (quoting Cantwell Smith), "is that knowledge that all intelligent men and women ... can share, and can jointly verify, by observation and by participation" (*No Other Name?* p. 11). But truth is not the possession of majorities – even if the vote is unanimous. All knowing of real-



ity, and supremely when the reality in question is God, is the work of people nurtured in a tradition of rational discourse. The fact that the Christian affirmation is made from one such socially embodied tradition in no way discredits its claim to speak truth. To pretend to possess the truth in its fullness is arrogance. The claim to have been given the decisive clue for the human search after truth is not arrogant; it is the exercise of our responsibility as part of the human family.

There is, of course, one final objection. It was classically expressed in the saying attributed to Rousseau: "If God wanted to say something to Jean Jacques Rousseau, why did He have to go round by Moses to say it?" Why Moses and not Socrates or Confucius or Gautama? Why one

people and not another? Should not "the transcendent" be equally and simultaneously available to every human being? Very clearly there lies behind the complaint that very ancient belief to which I have referred: the belief that in the last analysis I am a solitary soul with my own relationship with the Transcendent – whatever he, she, or it may be. And that belief is false. It rests upon an atomistic spirituality that contradicts what is most fundamental in human nature, namely, that our life is only fully human as we are bound up with one another in mutual caring and responsibility. When Stanley Samartha, in the Tambaram discussion, attacks the traditional work of missions because "conversion, instead of being a vertical movement towards God, a genuine renewal of life, has become a horizontal movement of groups of people from one community to another" (*IRM*, p. 321), he demonstrates his captivity to this illusion. We do not know God, in the sense of true personal knowledge, except as part of a community. The fact that the confession of Jesus as unique Lord and Savior is made by a particular human community among other communities provides no ground for denying its claim to speak truth. God's action for the salvation of the whole human family cannot be a series of private transactions within a multitude of individual souls; it is something wrought out in public history, and history is always concrete and specific. It is possible, as it has always been possible, to deny the truth of the Christian claim, as these writers do. But it is not possible to claim that the denial rests upon a kind of rationality superior to that which is embodied in the Christian tradition.

I think it is fair to say that the writers whom I am criticizing are not wholly to blame for this individualist perspective. I think that the whole debate about the uniqueness of Christ has for many decades been skewed by the notion that the only question at stake is the question of the fate of the individual soul in the next world. It is assumed that those who speak of the uniqueness of Jesus are saying that only Christians will be saved in the next world – which of course opens the way to destructive debates about who is a real Christian. It is enough to say that this way, of thinking has lost contact with the Bible. This individualism, with its center in the selfish concern of the individual about personal salvation, is utterly remote from the biblical view, which has as its center God and divine rule. The central question is not "How shall I be saved?" but "How shall I glorify God by understanding, loving, and doing God's will—here and now in this earthly life?" To answer that question I must insistently ask: "How and where is God's purpose for the whole of creation and the human family made visible and credible?" That is the question about the truth – objective truth – which is true whether or not it coincides with my "values." And I know of no place in the public history of the world where the dark mystery of human life is illuminated, and the dark power of all that denies human well-being is met and measured and mastered, except in those events that have their focus in what happened "under Pontius Pilate."

There is indeed a powerful current in our time that would sweep away such a claim and insist that the story of those events is simply one among the vast variety of "religious experience" and that it can be safely incorporated into a syllabus for the comparative study of religions. The current is strong because it is part of the drift of contemporary Western culture (of what in every part of the world is called "modernity") away from belief in the possibility of knowing truth and toward subjectivity. The World Council of Churches has been asked, at two general assemblies, to accept statements that seemed to call in question the uniqueness, decisiveness, and centrality of Jesus Christ. It has resisted. If, in the pull of the strong current, it should agree to go with the present tide, it would become an irrelevance in the spiritual struggles that lie ahead of us. I pray and believe that it will not.

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