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## THEOLOGIZING IN A WORLD OF PLURALISM

In recent years theologians have concerned themselves with the challenges presented by science, secular society, marxism and technology. Today these important and continuing concerns must give place to the problems presented to the theologian by the face to face encounter of the world religions. Advance warning to this effect was given theologians some seventeen years ago by Wilfred Cantwell Smith.

The time will soon be with us when a theologian who attempts to work out his position unaware that he does so as a member of a world society in which other theologians equally intelligent, equally devout, equally moral, are Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and unaware that his readers are likely to be Buddhists or to have Muslim husbands or Hindu colleagues—such a theologian is as out of date as is one who attempts to construct an intellectual position unaware that Aristotle has thought about the world or that existentialists have raised new orientations, or unaware that the earth is a minor planet in a galaxy that is vast only by terrestrial standards. Philosophy and science have impinged so far on theological thought more effectively than has comparative religion, but this will not last.<sup>1</sup>

Evidence that Smith's prediction has come true may be had by simply looking through the programmes of recent scholarly conferences. Over the past two years many seminars have focused on this very point. It is a question which completely occupied Paul Tillich in

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1. In an address presented to the Canadian Theological Society in Montreal; on May 18, 1961 and recently reprinted in *Religious Diversity*, ed. by W. Oxtoby (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 9.

his last years,<sup>2</sup> and it is a question which is increasingly placed, front and centre, by today's leading theologians.<sup>3</sup>

### Theological Limits and World Religions

Karl Rahner begins his discussion of the tasks and problems facing contemporary theology with the comment that the situation we now find ourselves in is one of insurmountable theological pluralism. Theology can no longer follow the simplistic pattern of the past where the problem of pluralism was overcome by application of the principle of non-contradiction—i.e. when two theological positions were seen to be contradictory alternatives, and according to the principle of non-contradiction by which both could not be right at the same time since their respective positions were opposed as the positive and negative sides of a contradiction, a decision could be taken one way or the other as to which one is right, and the pluralism or the contradiction would be overcome. This pattern typified scholastic theology of the past. It is a pattern which can no longer serve in the face of the theological challenge presented by the encounter of religions. As Rahner recognizes, theology finds itself in a new situation.

The pluralism of which we are speaking here, rather, consists precisely in the fact that it is quite impossible to reduce the theologies and their representative thesis to a simple logical alternative in this manner, in the fact that they exist side by side with one another as disparate and mutually incommensurable.<sup>4</sup>

In the above quotation Rahner is speaking of the pluralism that he finds currently to be the case within Christian theology alone. It is a pluralism which is insurmountable because no common basis can be found for the various theological schools upon which to arrive at a comparative understanding and logical judgment between alternatives. If Christians find this to be the case between the various

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2. Paul Tillich, *The Future of Religions*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

3. H. R. Burkle in his paper "Religions as Complimentary" has surveyed the modes developed to deal with this question by Tillich, Cobb and Swearer. Another helpful article in this regard is E.E. Piryns' "The Church and Interreligious Dialogue" in *The Japanese Missionary Bulletin*, No. 4 and 5, 1978. Piryns concisely summarizes the ways in which Karl Barth, Hans Küng and E. Schillebeeckx have responded to the question.

4. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. XI, translated by David Bourke (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974), p. 7.

theologies put forth within Christianity itself, how much greater will such a difficulty be when the competing claims of the various world religions are considered?

### *The Limiting Dimensions of Theological Pluralism*

The inescapable pluralism of all future theology is seen to have two limiting dimensions. First there is the fact that rival viewpoints adopt starting points so different that little or no common intellectual ground can really be established. And without the basis of this common ground, individual propositions cannot be discussed in such a way as to arrive at a positive "right" or "wrong" judgement. Although the two partners in the dialogue may anticipate similarities and differences in their positions, the lack of a common ground, says Rahner, "means that the representatives of the different schools cannot achieve, even indirectly, a position in which they can explain to one another consciously and unambiguously in what precisely the difference between their respective intellectual outlooks consist."<sup>5</sup> Here Rahner is pointing to the experience which he has (and he thinks others have) when one's partner in theological dialogue constantly proceeds from a different starting point than one's own, uses terms differently and assumes points as established which are alien to one's own thinking. This results in no conclusion being reached and the discussion being broken off for lack of time or other reasons which make it impossible to continue. In any case the lack of a common intellectual basis, preventing the reaching of positive conclusions, is a limit which necessitates pluralism in theology.

A second limiting dimension which Rahner identifies as necessitating theological pluralism has to do with the finite nature of the human mind. All the various theological positions can no longer be mastered by any one mind. Even if a single world civilization has emerged or were to emerge, Rahner thinks that there would still be interior differences which would manifest an increasing pluralism of theologies with respect to "their methods, their structural developments, their outlooks, their terminologies, and the practical trends to which they give rise. These differences will be so great that as theologies it will be quite impossible for them to be covered by, or subsumed under any one single homogeneous theology."<sup>6</sup> For the Christian, then, this means that

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5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

there cannot be any *one* theology, even when one's gaze is restricted to the Christian religion itself. If, by reason of the limited capacity of the human mind, dogmatic judgments cannot be made within Christianity itself, how much more must that be the case when theological reflection takes place within the larger context of the many world religions. Within the world religions context, theological pluralism is the rule.

Both of these limitations will have to be taken seriously by theologians functioning within a particular tradition or within the world religions context. Since the time of Nāgārjuna<sup>7</sup> in the East and Immanuel Kant<sup>8</sup> in the West, the intellectual limits of the human mind have been known—if not always respected. But perhaps more important for theologizing in a world religions context will be the first limitation indicated above—the lack of a common intellectual basis upon which dialogue or debate may be conducted. A theologian of one of the Western religions, i. e. Judaism, Christianity or Islam, will quickly encounter this difficulty if he begins to think through his concept of creation with a Hindu or his notion of God with a Buddhist. A common intellectual ground just does not seem to exist. Understanding, albeit partial and blurred, seems to come only when he suspends or brackets his own viewpoint and attempts to adopt the assumptions of the other, and “see” the universe through those alien concepts.

But here too certain psychological limits arise and must be taken seriously by the theologian. In any intellectual exercise in which the theologian attempts to “see” with the concepts of another religion, the psychological dynamics of his own mind will never allow him to be objective or neutral in his perceptions. His first impulse will be to identify similarities between the position of the other and himself. Usually this signals an act of intellectual reductionism, or what Freud termed “projection.”<sup>9</sup> Instead of a real similarity having been identified, the theologian has simply indulged in the self-protective mechanism of saying: “Oh yes, I see what you mean by that; it is exactly the same as I mean by this.” He projects his viewpoint onto the person of the other religion and then claims to discover that it is the same as

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7. Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, translated by K.K. Inada, Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1970. Nāgārjuna's date is given as C 150-250 A.D.
  8. Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960.
  9. Calvin S. Hall, *A Primer of Freudian Psychology* (New York: Mentor, 1958), pp. 89-91.

his own. Of course, this is very comforting in several ways. It suggests that there is only one truth after all, that he has it (probably in fuller or fullest measure, and thus implicitly or explicitly claims superiority for his view), and therefore no change is required. A making of what is more likely the true discovery, namely, that a real difference seems to exist, naturally produces emotional insecurity, and doubt that one's theological position is absolute.

Freud was not the first to discover this tendency toward projection within human nature. Many centuries ago in India, Nāgārjuna and other Mādhyamika Buddhists recognized this human limit or failing and made it the cornerstone of their model for theological dialogue.<sup>10</sup> Since human beings are by nature ego-attached to their own view or theological position, no amount of counter arguing from opposed positions will have any effect. The theologian in question will simply reinterpret an objection or counter position in such a way as to fit his system. In other words, by the mechanism of projection he will attempt to force you off your presuppositions and onto his. And since you will be attempting to do the same to him (both are ego-attached to their positions and cognitively cannot let go), an endless and unhelpful debate will ensue. With this psychological insight in hand, the model developed by the Mādhyamika Buddhists for theological debate was simple and devastating. The Mādhyamika entered the debate with no theological position of his own. His aim was to so completely understand the position of his opponent, that he would be able to find the internal inconsistencies inevitably present in every theological system, and then by *reductio ad absurdum* argument bring the whole thing crashing down around the ears of his opponent. To be defeated by one's own system brings on a severe psychological shock—one which might even convince the theologian to give up theologizing for good. And that, of course, was the very thing the Mādhyamika was hoping for. Once a theologian put down his pen and let go of his favourite concepts, the way was cleared or emptied of intellectual obstacles so that he could finally "see" reality as a pure perception and live his life appropriately.

The Mādhyamika and Freudian analyses both make clear that any attempt to theologically conceptualize reality is inevitably tied to the

10. The following understanding of the Mādhyamika approach is based upon T.R.V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, London: Allen and Unwin, second edition, 1960.

finite limitations of one's cognitive processes and the self-centred distorting emotions attached thereto.

### Implications of The Above Limitations For Theologizing in a World Religions Context

When the above limitations are taken seriously and applied to current theological models, a helpful critique results. With regard to Christianity, for example, it means that there is no longer any ground upon which a theologian can make absolute claims for a particular theological position. This leads to a paradox in which the claim of Christians to have universal truth is juxtaposed with the awareness of real pluralism which the world religions context brings. Following in the Buddhist line of thought, Rogers recently suggested that this paradox is a *koan* for contemporary Christians.

Like a koan, the problem of relating the particularity of Christian faith to its claim to universality is a paradox worthy of consideration. It is a moral, spiritual, and intellectual problem that is crucial for the continuing vitality of the Christian community... the koan for Christians may require sustained meditation to give us new light on how loyalty to Jesus Christ and his lordship is to be conceived in a religiously plural world.<sup>11</sup>

Various models have been produced by theologians in their attempts to solve this Christology *koan*. Hans Küng's argument that one should be a Christian because Jesus of Nazareth is "ultimately decisive, definitive, archetypal for man's relations with God, with his fellow man, with society" is found to violate the limits of theologizing on at least two counts. The first problem, of course, is that Küng is making the very kind of absolute claim to knowledge that the finite limits of the human mind rule out of court. Second, as Paul Knitter has pointed out in his careful assessment of Küng's argument, it is based on a badly blurred view of other religions.<sup>12</sup> In spite of Küng's warning to other theologians that they must not reach theological conclu-

11. Minor Lee Rogers, "Introduction" to *Christian Faith in a Religiously Plural World*, eds., D.G. Dawe and J.B. Carman (New York: Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1978), p. 7.

12. Paul F. Knitter, "World Religions and the Finality of Christ: A Critique of Hans Küng's 'On being Christian'" in *Horizons*, Vol. 5, Fall 1978, pp. 151-164.

sions without a clear knowledge of the other world religions, Knitter's analysis shows Kūng's own understanding to have been seriously distorted by the basic *a priori* of his thinking, namely, that Christ is the final norm for all religions.<sup>13</sup> Kūng has engaged in Freudian projection (seeing Christ as the unknown fulfilment of all other religions) and intellectual reductionism (incorrect and simplistic understandings of other religions, so as to fit them into his own categories).

Kūng's approach is not unlike the universal-particular move that is found in many other contemporary Christian theologies. Whereas all religions are recognized (in varying degrees) to be particular manifestations of the one universal God, Christianity is seen as the only religion which fully (or most fully) manifests the universal God and therefore must serve as the criterion for all others. Theological approaches, such as that proposed by John B. Cobb Jr.,<sup>14</sup> which presuppose a universal *logos* as foundational for all religions and then identify the *logos* as Christ are simply a variation on the same theme and suffer from the same failings of psychological projection and intellectual reductionism. If, for example, a Jew were to be told that the basis of his religion was the *logos* of which Jesus Christ was the criterion manifestation, his response to such a theology would most probably be that the theologian in question and never really understood the Jewish religion and indeed was taking a Christianized version of Judaism to be real Judaism. Christians frequently have the same sort of response when told by a Hindu that Christianity is fully encompassed within Hinduism as yet another particular manifestation of the one Brahman. It is not surprising that the Christian finds it difficult to recognize his own belief and practice in such a Hinduized version of Christianity. In all of these examples, theological limitations have not been respected and the result proves itself to be unacceptable when seen in a world religions context. Such proposed solutions to the Christian *koan* as to how the universal can be embodied in the particular revelation of Christ have to be experienced as failures to solve the problem.

Another kind of meditation put forward as a solution to the Christian *koan* resolves the problem by moving in the opposite direc-

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13. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

14. John B. Cobb, Jr., *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975.

tion. It attempts to overcome the paradox by seeing Christianity along with the other world religions as simply various manifestations of one common humanity. This is the approach frequently taken by theologians who have been seduced by the psychologists, sociologists or historians of religion. It is also a reductionism, but this time in the opposite direction. Instead of seeing the various religions as merely particular manifestations of the one divine, this solution reduces the transcendent experiences of the various religions to being no more than particular expressions of a common humanity. In the first, the human diversity of religious experience is reduced to a common divine reality; in the second, different divine realities are reduced to a common human experience.

In the theological context of world religions neither can be accepted as adequate solution to the problem posed by the Christian *koan*. Nor can these two opposing solutions be seen as thesis and anti-thesis out of which some third position like a Hegelian synthesis will some day arise and solve the problem. That would be a hope that is possible only because the theologian has still not taken seriously the limits outlined above. Any such new or third position would be the finite product of a finite mind and also subject to the kind of ego-attachment observed by Freud and the Mādhyamikas. With such inherent limitations it could not become an adequate basis for theological reflection in the context of world religions.

The implication of this discussion would seem to be that the Mādhyamika Buddhists are right. When the limitations on theologizing are taken seriously, as they must be in the context of world religions, all theologizing in the sense of establishing ultimate claims to knowledge must cease. Is the correct vision then one in which thousands of theologians of the various religions all around the world simultaneously put down their pens? What then—silence, *śunya*? Does it mean that when theologians take the limits of theologizing seriously they all become mystics?

To the Mādhyamika Buddhist and perhaps to most mystics the above questions may will be suggestive of true insight. Certainly there would be more silence, and may be that would mean more real hearing of each other in the dialogue between individuals and religions. That in itself would be a significant and positive gain. But could a taking of the limits to theologizing seriously also suggest a reconsideration



of the function of revelation. It is clear that no revelation can be taken to be absolute in the world religions context. But it seems equally clear that the individual believer, given his psychological and epistemological limitations, may require some personal revelation to guide him to and through the divine silence which the *koan* finally evokes. The sayings of Buddha would seem to have just this function for the Buddhist. Perhaps the Christian, Jew and Muslim devotees also experience their scriptures in similar ways—not as epistemological absolutes but as the revelation which guides him to his own experience of religious commitment.

Within the world religions context, then, theology is forced to take seriously its limitations and accept its pluralistic nature. No longer is its function directed toward debate and decision between mutually exclusive dogmatic perspectives. Nor is its goal the production of a new super-theology that will subsume within it all the pluralism of the present. The real role of theology today is to help the individual believer live the revelation of his personal religious commitment in the midst of a pluralistic world.