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RELIGIOUS PLURALISTS
What Are They Upto?

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1. Introduction

When John Hick, Paul Knitter and others put forth a theory (rather, a family of theories) which they baptized as "pluralism," it was hailed as a paradigm shift in theology. It has been hotly debated ever since, widely acclaimed, and roundly criticised. All of this was done on the assumption that it was a theology that they put forth, a "theology" of religions. But what if their proposal was not meant to be theology at all, as the protagonists themselves seem to acknowledge? It is called theology because of a built-in ambiguity of that discipline, an ambiguity that is carried on in fundamental theology and theology of religions today. I suggest that the tension between the two needs to be maintained in a more integral manner. Though the pluralists failed to do that, it is by keeping their concerns in mind together with an awareness of the shortcomings of their attempt that the further step can be taken.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first is a brief description of the pluralists' journey from the advocacy of a "Copernican revolution" in theology to the acknowledgment that pluralism is not first order theology. The second part questions as to why this acknowledgement has not led them to repudiate their earlier claim to its theological status. The answer is traced to the very definition of theology as "faith seeking understanding." This hides the perennial love-hate relationship between philosophy and theology in general and more specifically it blurs the important distinction between first order theological discourse and second order faith-inspired philosophical discourse. The third part shows that the tension gets lost in contemporary fundamental theology and theology of religions. The conclusion is that though the pluralists failed in their attempted task, their concern needs to be taken forward.

2. The Journey of Religious "Pluralism"

Although philosophers sometimes define pluralism broadly as any doctrine that holds that there are ultimately many things or many kinds of things,[1]

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in discussions of religious diversity, the term 'pluralism' is used in a more restricted sense. That there are many religions is more a sociological fact than a doctrine; it is designated as 'religious plurality' or 'religious diversity'. 'Religious pluralism', in contrast, refers to a theory of religious diversity that judges it as something positive and valuable, and not merely a brute fact to be tolerated.[2] Pluralists differ on the concrete form this positive evaluation is to take.

The original version of pluralism was based on a threefold typology coined by Alan Race in 1983.[3] As a Christian theological attempt at articulating a positive appreciation of other religions, "pluralism" portrayed itself as the most liberal view, with "exclusivism" as the least liberal and "inlcusivism" as falling in between "conservative" exclusivism and the "progressive" pluralism. In this scheme of things, positive evaluation of other religions meant treating one's own religion as "one among many,"[4] with no special status or privileges. T. J. Mawson puts this pluralist view with great clarity when he says that it involves the following "three claims:

1. All major religious traditions are equal in respect of making common reference to a single transcendent sacred reality.

2. All major traditions are likewise equal in respect of offering some means or other to human salvation.

3. All traditions are to be seen as containing revisable, limited, accounts of the nature of the sacred: none is certain enough in its particular dogmatic formulations to provide the norm for interpreting the others."[5]

Mawson presents this as the summary view of the Peter Byrne's position in his *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism*. John Hick's definition of religious pluralism is only marginally different. It is "the view that the great world religions constitute conceptually and culturally different

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[1]Edward Craig, "Pluralism," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, version 1.0, London: Routledge, 1998.

[2]See for example, Mathew Jayanth, "From Plurality to Pluralism: Constructing a Sociological Theory of Religious Pluralism," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 64/11 (2000), 807-24.

[3]Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism : Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983.

[4]John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989, 3.

[5]T. J. Mawson, "'Byrne's' Religious Pluralism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 58, no. 1 (2005), 38.

responses to an ultimate transcendent reality, these responses being, so far as we can tell, more or less on a par when judged by their fruits."[6] This definition has a greater emphasis on the conceptual and cultural differences. But these differences are really not significant as these different religions are more or less on par. This manner of seeing religions, obviously required a "considerable restructuring of Christian theology,"[7] such that all those aspects of Christianity that are unique to it such as the doctrines of Incarnation and the Trinity had to be "de-emphasize[d] and eventually filter[ed] out."[8] And when "each of the world's religions ... [begins] to deemphasize its own absolute and exclusive claim" such claims would "fall into the background and eventually to become absorbed into its past history."[9]

The self-serving agenda of this threefold classification based on the notions of "progress" and "liberalism" is unmistakable.[10] But the rhetoric enabled the term "pluralism" with its "inclusivist" and "exclusivist" adjuncts to catch on as the standard descriptions in theology of religions. Before long some of those who adopted the terminology, like Gavin D'Costa, began to be very critical of it.[11] The worst blow came when the self congratulatory tone of the classification and its liberality balloon were punctured by the critics who pointed out the inherent exclusivism of the pluralists, when this position is seen as normative for all. [12]

In the place of such "normative pluralism,"[13] a more pluralistic pluralism was advocated by Mark Heim. Heim's pluralism suggested not only many paths but also many salvific ends. This enables each religion

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[6]John Hick, "The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Reply to Gavin D'costa," *Religious Studies* 33(1997), 161.

[7]Hick, ed., *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, New York: Palgrave, 2001, 179.

[8]Hick, ed., *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, 17.

[9]Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* 2-3.

[10]Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 8-9.

[11]Gavin D'Costa, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," *Religious Studies* 32, no. 2 (1996); Gavin D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions*, Chichester, U.K./ Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

[12]Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995, 102.

[13]Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 9.

free to hold on to what is unique to them. With this postmodern turn, the journey of pluralism reaches almost a full circle. The original kind of pluralism is now identified more or less with John Hick or at best with the theologians associated with *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*.[14] Even when they attempted to defend and revive it at the global level with a sequel to the original *Myth* under the title, *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, there are signs that the criticism had gone home.[15]

2.1. First Order Theology and Second Order Theory

The pluralists responded to the accusations of being exclusivists by acknowledging that pluralism was not meant to be a first order theology. According to Hick, pluralism is "not another historical religion making an exclusive religious claim, but a meta-theory about the relation between the historical religions. Its logical status as a second-order philosophical theory or hypothesis is different in kind from that of a first-order religious creed or gospel. And so the religious pluralist does not, like the traditional religious exclusivist, consign non-believers to perdition …"[16] One is "a self-committing affirmation of faith and the other a philosophical hypothesis."[17] Paul Knitter also makes a similar distinction between "first-order theology" and "second-order theory of dialogue."[18] Theology is a first order religious discourse articulating a religious experience where as the second order theory about religions is best considered a philosophical discourse. If Knitter talked of "global theology"[19] earlier, his later works talk of a "globally responsible theology."[20] The first implies a theology

[14]John Hick and Paul Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Faith Meets Faith, New York: Maryknoll,1987.

[15]See for example, Arvind Sharma, "Can There Be More Than One Kind of Pluralism?" in *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration*, ed. Paul Knitter, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005.

[16]Hick, "The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Reply to Gavin D'costa" 163. See also John Hick, "Religious Pluralism and the Divine: A Response to Paul Eddy," *Religious Studies* 31(1995), 418.

[17]Hick, "The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Reply to Gavin D'costa" 163.

[18]Paul Knitter, "Theocentric Christology: Defended and Tanscended," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* XXIV, no. 1 (1987), 45.

[19]Paul Knitter, *No Other Name*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985, 224-231.

[20]Paul Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue & Global Responsibility*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995, 15; Paul Knitter, *Jesus and Other Names*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996, 16.

that takes into account all the different experiences and revelations found in different religious traditions of the world, the latter is less demanding; it could be rooted in one's own religious tradition, but takes responsibility for the well being of all. This comes from the realization that the "common God" found in different religious communities "usually turns out to be *my* God."[21] Similarly he has called his 1996 book *Jesus and Other Names* a "*theological* Act 2" of his *One Earth Many Religions* (1995).[22]

In order to understand the ambivalent relationship between first order theology and second order theory, we need to look closely into the differences between philosophy and theology found in the Christian tradition, an ambivalence that is carried on in the fundamental or foundational theology of our times.

3. The Ambivalent Relationship between Theology and Philosophy

The relationship between philosophy and theology has had an ambivalent character from the beginning of Christianity. On the one hand, it had no difficulty in using categories from the Greek philosophy it encountered in its formative stages, Christ being characterized as the eternal logos is an obvious example (Jn 1:1-18; Col 1:15-17). On the other hand, the same Paul would proclaim "philosophy and empty deceit" as sources of waywardness (Col 2:8). The sharpest manifestation of this seemingly anti-philosophical attitude is found in the famous rhetorical question of the third century theologian Tertullian, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Although St. Thomas Aquinas brought the two into an uneasy reconciliation in the Middle Ages, that arrangement was taken apart by the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century. Martin Luther condemned reason as "the devil's whore" when it enters into the sacred precincts of theology.[23] On the other hand, the Enlightenment attacks on theology gave a fresh impetus to natural theology and apologetics. This story has continued throughout the history of Christianity.

In order to understand this love-hate relationship between philosophy and theology, we must understand the important ways in which theology differs from philosophy and still very much linked and even dependent on it. First of all, they have different starting points. Philosophy begins with

[21]Knitter, *Jesus and Other Names*, 19.

[22]Knitter, *Jesus and Other Names*, 1.

[23]From Luther's "Postil for Epiphany," cited in Francis Clark, *Godfaring: On Reason, Faith, and Sacred Being*, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2000, 2.

that which is available to all human beings such as sense experience and the use of reason. Even when philosophy deals with God, it talks of an understanding of God that is a human achievement, attained through reason. Theology, on the other hand, begins with some specific content or subject matter that is not available to philosophy as a common human heritage. No amount of manoeuvring with common human resources like natural reason or sense experience can yield the concrete and particular content found in the Christian revelation that Jesus is the Son of God or that God has a Trinitarian character.

Secondly, religious experience is categorically different from sense experience. Sense experience is more or less a universal human possession. Religious or revelatory experience, in contrast, is not universal in the same way. It is an insight and like all insights, is something that can be missed, something that needs to be caught. Theology, then, could be seen as an attempt to articulate a religious experience.[24] The main difference, then, is that philosophy is based on universal human resources whereas theology is "tradition-specific," as explicitly pointed by Gavin D'Costa.[25] Theology is built on a revelation that is considered normative in that tradition whereas philosophy is not.

Thirdly, philosophy is not guided by any particular revelation like that of Christianity or Islam; it need not be guided by any religious insight at all. Philosophical reason can be used to argue for God's existence, as Aquinas did; it could also be used to argue against it, as many atheists do; it can also be used to do a kind of compromise between them as the deists did. A discourse about God and Religion need not be a religious discourse at all. From the perspective of theology, philosophy can be a wayward discipline. And here we can the reason why theology tends to have an aversion to philosophy.

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[24]Latourelle objects to this understanding on the ground that it neglects the distinction between revelation and faith, the original foundational experience and the response made to that experience. René Latourelle, "Revelation," in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, eds., René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, New York: St. Paul's, 1990, 944. This is not an objection against revelation being a religious experience, but points to the inadequacy of some theories of religious experience.

[25]D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions*, 3. Michael Amaladoss has made a similar observation. See, Michael Amaladoss, "Evangelisation in Asia: A New Focus?" *Vidyajoyti Journal of Theological Reflection* 51 (1987).

3.2. Second Order and First Order: A Marriage of Necessity

Philosophical reason may be a "devil's whore" from the perspective of theology, but believers who want to refute their opponents have no choice but to use the same reason for the purpose. This was one of the roles that Thomas Aquinas assigned to reason in matters of faith: to show that objections against the truths known from revelation are either fallacious or inconclusive. Apart from this negative use of reason, Aquinas also gave it positive role, that is, to "prove" God's existence. This came to be known as natural theology, as distinct from theology based on revelation. Aquinas, however, gave the guiding role to faith, whereby the believer's use of reason is guided by revelation. The use of logic and reasoning is common to both theologians who use revelation as their starting point as well as others who rely on the more common experience from the senses.

There is another sense in which philosophy is understood as a second order discipline in relation to theology. We use language to talk about the world. For example, we say, "It's a beautiful song," "Socrates is a good man," and so on. This is first order discourse and its focus is on something in the world. But if someone were to ask, "You say, 'It's a beautiful song', but what is beauty?" or "What is goodness?" our conversation would no longer be about the world, but about the concepts 'beauty' and 'goodness'. This is second order discourse. When I say, "I love you," it is first order talk; when I raise questions about what love is, that is second order talk. The logical positivists held that all philosophy is second order talk. Irrespective of whether we hold all philosophy is a second order discipline, there is hardly any doubt that a significant part of philosophy, if not most of it, is conceptual inquiry. This has been from the time Socrates of who decided to counter-question his contemporaries about the basic concepts they unreflectively used in their everyday discourse. There can be no first order talk unless a conceptual structure is already in place. In this sense philosophy is absolutely indispensible to any first order discipline, including theology. As first order discipline, Christian theology talks about the love of God, the manifestation of that love in Jesus Christ and so on. But no such talk can get going unless a conceptual structure involving 'love', 'God' and so on, is already in place. Philosophy, in this sense, is the very condition of the possibility of theology; then there can be no theology without philosophy, as Karl Rahner observed.[26]

[26]Rahner considered philosophy as an "inner moment of theology." Karl Rahner, *Concerning Vatican Council II,* trans. Karl H. Kruger and Boniface Kruger,

Philosophy understood in terms of logic and arguments can also be considered a second order activity, in the sense of being secondary. The primary purpose of theological discourse is to communicate a religious message. It invites people to transform their lives in accordance with a specific religious insight or vision. In Christian terms the primary purpose of religious discourse is "Godfaring," to borrow an excellent expression from Francis Clark.[27] A first order theology is a Godfaring discourse, a part of the wayfaring pilgrim's journey to God. (Godfaring, of course, can be done without indulging in theological discourse, as many saints have done). Any argument is subservient to this primary aim of theological discourse. Philosophy, then, is second order discourse in the sense of being secondary to Godfaring discourse, as well as in the sense of being a discourse that seeks to clarify and understand its conceptual structure.

Either way, theology is dependent on philosophy: as a rational discourse, it is required to argue one's case; as a discipline that discusses and clarifies conceptual issues, first order theology cannot even get started without philosophy. Because of such dependence, no matter how averse it might be to some theologians, they cannot do without philosophy. This explains the love-hate relationship of theology and philosophy.

3.3. Theology as Communication

Theology, by its very nature, is communication.[28] Communication is the transmission of a message from a source to a destination.[29] In the context of religious communication, the source is a person who has a religious experience, a revelation, or at the very least, someone who is convinced of the teachings of a religious tradition.[30] The message is the religious

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vol. 6, *Theological Investigations*, Baltimore-London: Helican Press-Darton, 1969, 71-81. In Rahner's theology, the conceptual structure is provided by his existentialist understanding of the human person who is radically open to transcendence.

[27]Clark, *Godfaring : On Reason, Faith, and Sacred Being*, xiv.

[28]Although in the context of religion, communication could also be used for expression (as done in rituals). James W. Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," in *Communication as Culture: Essays on the Media and Society*, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989, 13-36. Our concern is with communication as transmission than expression.

[29]Wilbur Schramm, "How Communication Works," in *Basic Readings in Communication Theory*, ed. C. David Mortensen, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1973, 28.

[30]Although most religious traditions ultimately trace this human source to another source beyond the human (say, God), this can be safely ignored as far as

insight. The addressee of a theological communication is one's own religious community. According to Rino Fisichella, "If theology were not addressed to someone, it would be no more than the theologian's theoretical solipsistic speculation and there would be no point to it." He goes on to say that determining who the addressee of a theological discourse is "to some extent conditioned by ... the differing social and cultural conditions in which this activity takes place."[31] David Tracy talks about three "publics" that contemporary theologians need to address: the society, the Church and the academia.[32] Paul Griffiths gives us a different list of three addressees: the religious kin or one's own fellow believers who share one's religious tradition; the religious alien or those who do not share one's religious tradition, but are still religious believers; and thirdly the non religious comprising the agnostics, the atheists and the naturalists.[33] For our purpose of understanding the difference between first order theology and second order theory, it is Griffiths' categories of religious kin and religious alien (including the non-believers) that is relevant. A first order theology is addressed first and foremost to one's religious kin, to what Tracy calls the public of the Church.

A second order discourse, in contrast, is addressed to the religious alien, those who do not belong to one's religious tradition. It is not addressed, primarily at least, to those inside the tradition. This is a fourth difference between theology and philosophy. This outsider-oriented discourse has taken various forms in the history of Christianity, as even a brief glance at the history of its apologetic tradition makes clear.[34] It was addressed to diverse constituencies: to potential converts, to the civil authorities of ancient Rome, to the intellectual adversaries who questioned the veracity of Christian faith, and so on. Whether it was the earliest

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theological communication is concerned; God does not do theology, only human beings do. Therefore we can safely say that the source of theological communication is a human person.

[31]Rino Fisichella, "Fundamental Theology II: Adressee," in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, eds. René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, New York: St. Paul's, 1990, 332.

[32]David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981.

[33]Paul J. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001, xiv.

[34]See, Avery Dulles, "Apologetics I: History," in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, New York: St. Paul's, 1990.

Christian preaching found in the Acts of the Apostles, the famous writings of the apologists of the patristic age, the natural theology of the Middle Ages, or the "physico-theology"[35] found at the origins of modern atheism narrated by Michael Buckley, it was always addressed to those outside one's religious tradition. Since it is addressed to those outside, the nature of a second order theory depends on the boundary conditions.

A first order theology is tradition-specific in a twofold way. It is tradition-specific, both in terms of its guiding insight or revelatory experience as well as in terms of its destination. The implication is that we cannot speak of theology in the abstract; there is no such thing. A first order theology is always a theology that is Christian, Hindu, Islamic, etc. And even within these, a theology tends to be Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Vaishnavite, Shaivaite, and so on, as D'Costa clarifies.

A fifth difference comes from this tradition-specific character of first order theology. As existential discourse offering a roadmap to fellow Godfarers, first order theology uses the language common to that religious tradition. But a second order discourse, though its message is inspired by one's own tradition, does not use the language specific to that tradition. Since it is addressed to the outsider, it "translates" the message into a language that is accessible to the outsider. This explains, for example, why the natural theology of St. Thomas, though communicating the same message as that of St. Paul in Rom.1:19-21 (God can be known to some extent through God's creation), uses the language and style of Aristotle and the Islamic philosophers ("first cause") than the language of the Bible ("creator," "deliverer" etc.). It cannot use the language specific to one's tradition as it would not be intelligible to the outsider. The purpose of communication is to convey the message and not to perpetuate a language.

Sixth, a first order theology is first and foremost a religious discourse whereas a second order theory is a discourse about religions. The primary purpose of all first order religious discourse, whether it is that of Jesus or of the Buddha or of Guru Nanak, is existential. As a part of the Godfaring discourse, first order theology is an undertaking guided by the same original or foundational experience; it has made that specific form of

[35]Michael Buckley, "Modernity and the Satanic Face of God," in *Christian Spirituality and the Culture of Modernity : The Thought of Louis Dupre*, eds. Peter J. Casarella and George P. Schner, S.J., Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998, 102. Buckley uses this term to describe the kind of natural theology that was built on the findings of modern science.

revelation and the faith manifestation of that tradition as one's life-guiding principle. Guided by that tradition, a first order theology seeks to understand and communicate that understanding to other Godfarers who are fellow travellers (religious kin), as guideposts in their journey. A second order theory may be as much guided by the same particular foundational experience as first order theology, but it is not oriented to Godfaring in the way the first order theology is. Addressed as it is to various destinations, its objectives are diverse. The early apostolic preaching was addressed to potential converts to win them over; some of the apologists addressed the Roman authorities to gain legal tolerance for Christianity; and others wrote to counter their intellectual adversaries. It is primarily discourse about religion rather than a religious discourse.

To sum up, there are crucial differences between these two kinds of communications. First order theology is tradition-specific in the twofold sense we have seen. Its source is a particular revelation or religious experience specific to the identity of religious community. But a second order discourse is not tradition-specific in terms of its addressee. If the first order theology is religious discourse, second order theory is discourse about religion; if the former has an existential orientation, the latter tends to have a theoretical orientation. If the one exists within the boundaries, the other exists on the outer edges of a first order discourse. If the characteristic feature of first order discourse is its existential and Godfaring character, the defining feature of second order discourse is that it remains peripheral to the main concern of the first order discourse. If the one is driven from within by an inner urge to communicate a religious insight, the other is driven from without by the boundary conditions.

3.4. Blurring the Differences

In spite of such important differences, the classical definition of theology as faith seeking understanding, given by St. Anselm, is one that has blurred the distinction between first and second order discourse. Anselm's discourse was first and foremost, a faith-guided Godfaring activity. He wrote in response to the request of his fellow monks and they were the addressee. Therefore, it was first order religious discourse: a tradition-specific, Godfaring activity. It was also a second order discourse at the same time. The religious alien to whom a second order theory is addressed need not always be another social group or physical entity; a religious outsider need not always be an outsider, to put it paradoxically. It could as well be the critical side of the believing theologian. Such second order

discourse, then, becomes the theologian's "silent reasoning with himself," as St. Anselm put it.[36] Since the "outsider" of the second order discourse becomes the "other self" of the theologian, the speaker and the addressee become merged into one, and the distinction between first order religious discourse and second order discourse about religions become blurred. Thus, Anselm's definition of theology is not only a first order discourse in the full sense of the term, but it was also a second order discourse that had also an internalised "other" as part of the Godfaring process because of which he could speak of it as "silent reasoning with himself."

Various internal and external factors contributed to this merging of the speaker and the addressee and the blurring of the distinction between the two levels of discourse. I shall point out three important ones, two internal and one external. First, the internal ones: if first order theology is primarily a Godfaring activity that forms a part of the pilgrim's journey to God, it is the whole person of the pilgrim that he or she carries to God. And the whole person includes one's critical faculties. The pilgrim has got on the road because of the special experience or revelation one has received and the journey is guided by the light of that experience. But it is also the case that that special experience does not make up the whole person of the pilgrim. The Godfarer also shares the common experiences of other human beings, and feels the need to relate these different experiences, or what David Tracy puts in Christian terms as correlating of the "common human experience and the Christian fact."[37] Such common experience is also the realm of philosophy and therefore, when the "outside" addressee of second order discourse becomes internalized, second order discourse gets merged into the first order discourse.

A second internal factor that led to the merger of the two levels of discourse in Christianity has to do with the comparative solidification of the conceptual structures needed in the first order theological discourse. In the formative period of a religion that is based on a foundational experience (like the Christ-event in Christianity or Siddhartha Gautama's Enlightenment in Buddhism), the experience guides the formation of its community and its first order discourse. While experience can provide a

[36]St. Anselm, "Proslogium," *Internet Medieval Sourcebook: Anselm (1033-1109)*, Fordham University Center for Medieval Sudies, http://www.fordham.edu /halsall/ basis/anselm-proslogium.html (Preface), Accessed on 6th July 2010.

[37]See, David Tracy, "The Task of Fundamental Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 54, 1 (1974).

general orientation to such discourse, its implications begin to emerge only gradually. The experience of the early Christians, for example, led them to recognize God as triune. But it took time for the community to come to some clarity on what it meant. In other words, if the Trinitarian language is typically the language of Christian first order theology, the discourse leading to the clarification of the meaning of Trinity is a second order discourse. This is an activity that focuses on the linguistic and conceptual structure within which first order discourse is conducted. This conceptual structure gets gradually fixed in the various Councils. But this is not about the Godfaring insight, but about the language or the presuppositions within which the message is communicated to those in the community. But since it concerns the language within which first order discourse is conducted, it becomes inseparable from the first order discourse.

Since a second order discourse is driven by the boundary conditions and is essentially a response to those conditions, it is to be expected that changes in the external, historical factors will affect the nature of second order discourse. With the coming of Christendom, there was a drastic change in the boundary conditions. For example, the religious "other" whom the apostles addressed and the philosophical "other" like Celsus whom Origen addressed largely disappeared. These external factors, combined with the internal factors enabled the internalization of the "other" and contributed to the merging of first order theology and second order theory.

St. Anselm's understanding of theology, therefore, is a first order discourse as it is a Godfaring discourse guided by the Christian revelation and addressed to fellow Christians. It is also a second order discourse in both senses of the term. Its addressee is an internalized "other" because of which he could speak of his theology as "silent reasoning with himself." It is second order discourse also in the sense that Anselm contributed to the conceptual structure used in first order theology, the most famous of his contribution being his understanding of God as "a being than which nothing greater can be conceived."[38] Although this language is often taken as a dry philosophical formulation leading to the ontological proof for the existence of God, in the context of addressing his monks, Anselm's language can also be understood as the language of devotion.[39]

[38]Anselm, "Proslogium," Chapter II, Accessed on 6th July 2010.

[39]John Clayton, "The Otherness of Anselm," in *The Otherness of God*, ed. Orrin Summerell, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998, 14-34.

3.5. Consequences

It is this blurring of differences between two different kinds of discourse that is built into the definition of theology, I suggest, the source of the ambivalent stand of Hick and Knitter towards their pluralism. On the one hand, they can deny that their pluralism is first order theology, and yet continue to discuss it as if they had made no such denial! In the latter mode they continue to speak of revolutionising theology.

This ambivalent use of "theology" also explains why the so-called pluralistic theology is not one theory, but an undertaking that seeks to do many things at once. (1) Faced with religious diversity, they have sought to treat all religions equally without fear or favour so that followers of other religions are treated on a par with one's own; one's own religion becomes "one among many." (2) Faced with atheistic naturalism, they (especially Hick) have sought to espouse a religious view of reality. (3) Faced with the scientific study of religion, pluralists have sought to adopt a scientific approach that would also be the key to the equal treatment of religions. (4) Christian thinkers from non-Western cultures have an additional complication in hand: their faith is seen to be too closely associated with Western culture. Therefore they seek to give inculturated character to their accounts of faith. (5) Another kind of dialogue is sought in the face of poverty and religious diversity. The attempt is to bring together followers of different religions (and others) with the goal of social justice and peace. (6) Faced with religious diversity, if the pluralists have sought to dialogue with them, they have also turned to fellow believers to prod them on to making a "paradigm shift in theology." The first five are concerned with addressing the religious alien directly or indirectly whereas the addressee of the last is the religious kin. This conflation of the two is made possible by blurring the distinction between the two kinds of discourses found in the Anselmian understanding of theology.

Anyone who operates with an understanding of theology that blurs the distinction between first order discourse and second order discourse is also prone to its defects. The Achilles' heel of the Anselmian understanding is that it hides the basic tension between faith and understanding, the specialty of the revelatory experience and the commonality of other common human experiences, the tantalizing glimpse of the divine that guides one's path and the seeming absence of the divine that makes one question that which was glimpsed. It hides the tension between philosophy and theology, between second order discourse about

Religion and the first order religious discourse. Not paying sufficient attention to this distinction leads to an overemphasis on either of the poles.

Exclusive emphasis on the theoretical, second order discourse leads to the neglect of the practical Godfaring character of first order theology. It, then, degenerates into the kind of discussions about the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin, attributed to the medieval scholastics. It is such discourse that is unrelated to salvation that St. Paul called "empty deceit" and warned against. This ambivalent use of "theology" also explains why the most trenchant critics of pluralism are theologians who practice their discipline as a first order discourse. Like Luther, they find it the "devil's whore" that assaults the Godfaring religious discourse by turning it into a discourse about religions.

Forgetfulness of the tension can also lead in the other direction that neglects the outward looking, frontier-located character of the second order discourse, making it into an inward looking enterprise. This is most noticeable in the present state of fundamental theology, with repercussions in theology of religions.

It is essential, therefore, that if the Anselmian understanding of theology is to be maintained, deliberate steps must be taken to maintain the tension between its function as a Godfaring first order discourse and a theoretical second order discourse. A neglect of either will lead to the failure of the overarching purpose of both kinds of discourse which is to communicate and facilitate a religious way of life. A first order discourse tries to achieve it in a manner that is appropriate to the insider whereas a second order discourse does it in a manner that is credible to the outsider. If this overall purpose of religious communication is not to be compromised, it becomes absolutely necessary that the tension between the two be maintained.

3.6. Restoring the Blurred Distinctions: The Thomist Way

A good way of maintaining this tension is found in Thomas Aquinas, who worked within the Anselmian understanding of theology, without allowing the tension between the two poles to disappear. He maintained the tension in two complementary ways. First, his Christian faith was the guiding principle of both the first order discourse as well as the second order discourse. Second, he gave distinct roles to both. St. Thomas contented that we can know God from God's creation with the use of our natural reason. What can be known in this manner is the existence of God; what cannot be known by means of reason is the nature of God (God as triune,

incarnate in Jesus Christ, etc.). Reason enables us to know *that* God is, not *what* God is. The former is the task of philosophy, based on natural reason and the latter is the task of theology, based on (Christian) revelation. Thus, second order discourse in the form of natural theology and apologetics was expected to prove God's existence, and thus prepare the way for accepting the special revelation that he lived by. It was a preamble to first order theology, a propaedeutic and not a substitute. Having done its task, the second order discourse takes leave, so to say, and first order theology (with its specific revelation) takes charge in the task of guiding the Godfarer on the way forward. Thus even when the second order discourse was guided by faith, it remained in the periphery of first order theology. Its place was on the boundaries where faith and reason, revelation and the world met.

4. Fundamental Theology and Theology of Religions

Although I cannot elaborate it here, it seems to me that this is the situation that prevails in contemporary fundamental theology. As the successor to the older natural theology and apologetics,[40] fundamental theology is a "discipline on the boundary" engaging in dialogue with disciplines and people who are not within the boundary of one's shared faith.[41] Fundamental theology is best seen, therefore, as a second order discourse. It emerged in response to the changed boundary conditions. If the establishment of Christendom contributed to making the addressee of the second order discourse largely an internalized "other," the external "other" returned with a vengeance with the breakup of Christendom. That breakup and the subsequent wars of religion, the joint working of colonial explorations, renewed missionary activity, and large scale migrations enabled by modern technology made religious diversity a lived reality in the Western world. Fundamental theology was born in response to this return of the external "other," both in terms of non-Christian believers and the new scientific disciplines that emerged in the modern period, as

[40]René Latourelle, "Fundamental Theology I: History and Specific Character," in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, New York: St. Paul's, 1990, 324. I club natural theology together with apologetics on the basis of (1) Avery Dulles's treatment of the history of apologetics (f.26) and (2) Fisichella's treatment of the addressee of fundamental theology in Fisichella, "Fundamental Theology II: Adressee," 333.

[41]René Latourelle, "Fundamental Theologian," in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, New York: St. Paul's, 1990, 322.

narrated by Rene Latourelle.[42] At the same time, since it was developed within the Anselmian understanding of theology, "there has been certain ambivalence" as to whether fundamental theology is properly a philosophical or a theological discipline.[43] This ambiguity was resolved by most theologians finally opting to consider it theology. But in the process of resolving this ambivalence in favour of theology, fundamental theology was made into an inward looking discipline where other religious believers do not even find a place among the addressees of fundamental theology.[44] This is because the distinction between the tradition-specific first order discourse and outward looking second order discourse is not maintained. It is into this existing vacuum in fundamental theology that has neglected the religious other as an addressee of religious concern that the pluralists step in, with the external religious other as the prime category.

Just the opposite has happened with theology of religions. Since pluralism is often taken as theology of religions, it is important to see the distinction between theology of religions and fundamental theology. Both are theology as long as we remain with Anselm's definition of theology and not distinguish between first order theological discourse and a second order discourse about religions. But once the distinction is acknowledged, a theology of religions would fall under the category of first order theology. Like all first order theology, it is tradition-specific in the twofold sense we have examined. In the light of one's own religious faith, it seeks to understand the implications of living in a religiously pluralistic world. Need for such discourse arises when a convinced believer who knows the efficacy of one's own religion in his or her pilgrimage, finds other religious believers making similar claims about the efficacy of their religions. Theology of religions seeks to understand and evaluate those claims in the light of one's own faith tradition. It reflects on such questions

[42]René Latourelle, "Introduction to the English Language Edition," in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, New York: St. Paul's, 1990, xiii-xiv.

[43]P. J. Cahill, "Fundamental Theology," in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, eds. Berard L. Marthaler and Gregory F. LaNave, New York: Gale, 2003. René Latourelle and Gerald O'Collins, eds., *Problems and Perspectives of Fundamental Theology*, New York: Paulist Press,1982. See specially the articles in the first part about the ambiguous identity of the discipline.

[44]This is clearly seen in Reno Fisichella's article on fundamental theology devoted exclusively to the addressee of fundamental theology Fisichella, "Fundamental Theology II: Adressee," 332-36.

as the salvific significance of one's own religious tradition for the religious alien, the significance of their claims for one's own journey, if any.[45] Should a religious alien be considered on a par with non-religious aliens (atheists and the naturalists who reduce religions to mere human projections)? In finding answers to such questions, one's religious faith becomes not only the guiding inspiration for a theology of religions, but also normative to it. Since its addressee is one's fellow believers and not those outside one's religious tradition, theology of religions speaks the language and vocabulary of the faith familiar to one's fellow believers. Theology of religions, therefore, is a first order religious discourse that is tradition-specific in both senses.

A fundamental theology, on the other hand, in keeping with its original vocation of being a second order discipline that is addressed to the "outsiders" speaks a different language, a language that is intelligible to the "other." While speaking the language that is intelligible to the other, it cannot repudiate the centrality of one's faith, since one's own faith remains the inspiration for reaching out to the other, out of concern for the salvation of the other. As a discipline on the frontiers, fundamental theology is a discipline in a certain tension with first order theology such that neither can swallow up the other.

4.1. Pluralism as Attempted Fundamental Theology

When theology of religions is distinguished from fundamental theology in this manner, it makes better sense to see the pluralists as attempting to fill in the said vacuum in fundamental theology, than as proposing a theology of religions, in spite of their rhetoric of a theological revolution. On the one hand, there is evidence to show that the pluralists were engaged in first order theological discourse. The publication of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* arose from the discussion of Christian thinkers. Fellow Christians were the intended addressee, as it is offered as an "option for Christian believers."[46] There is also Hick's contention of making a Copernican revolution in theology and the elaboration of a Christology that downplays doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity.

On the other hand, we have the explicit statement of Paul Knitter that his foray into religious diversity was an attempt to lay out "the preamble of faith – the foundation, starting points, presuppositions for Christian faith

[45]In the light of one's certainty regarding the efficacy of one's own religious path, it becomes necessary to add the qualification "if any."

[46]Hick and Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, viii, 18.

as these are found within the human condition."[47] If so, it is fundamental theology; it is a continuation of the *preambula fidei* of Aquinas, adapted with an explicit focus on religious diversity, in keeping with the changed boundary conditions of the contemporary world. Similarly John Hick sees his task as a continuation of natural theology, but not a natural theology that seeks to prove the existence of God but one that is more suited to the pluralistic context.[48] It is in this context that he offers "a religious but not confessional interpretation of religion."[49] And the reasons that prompt him to undertake this effort is almost the same as the changed conditions that Latourelle provides as reasons for the emergence of fundamental theology. The difference between Latourelle's description of the changes in the boundary conditions and Hick's description of the contemporary context is only a matter of emphasis. Hick gives greater attention to the diversity of religions that characterize the contemporary world. Latourelle treats diversity more generally in terms divergent belief systems where none is able to dominate the other. Hick's treatment is more detailed. He treats these divergent belief systems under two different categories: followers of other religious traditions and those who are naturalistic in their outlook, considering the former sympathetically and the latter as fundamentally mistaken. In spite of these differences, there can be no doubt that Hick is dealing with the changed boundary conditions of contemporary theology. Finally, there is the explicit acknowledgement from both Hick and Knitter that theirs is not first order theology, but a second order theory. Hick qualifies his second order theory as "philosophical" and Knitter qualifies his theory as "theory of dialogue."

Hick has not repudiated, however, his forays into Christology, but has only got more deeply entrenched into it.[50] Similar is the case with Knitter,[51] in spite of some seeming vacillation mentioned earlier. Though the distinction between the orders of discourse is made in response to criticism, the pluralists themselves do not seem to have taken the distinction seriously and continue to operate with the undifferentiated and

[47]Knitter, *No Other Name*, 227.

[48]Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion:Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 219.

[49]Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion:Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 1.

[50]See, for example, John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age*, 2nd ed., Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

[51]Paul Knitter, ed. *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration*, Faith Meets Faith Series, New York: Maryknoll, 2005. This book is meant to be a sequel to the earlier *Myth of Christian Uniqueness.*

ambivalent understanding of theology found in Anselm. The best explanation for their ambivalence, it seems to me, is to see pluralism as an attempt to fill in a felt vacuum in fundamental theology. There is no doubt that they are inspired by their faith to undertake this task; but if it is fundamental theology, their addressee cannot be considered exclusively, or even primarily, the Christian community. The very fact that their attempt is to provide a "level playing field" for interreligious dialogue seems to indicate that their focus is on the religious alien.[52]

Considered as an attempt at developing a fundamental theology, their attempt, like any pioneering effort, can be seen only as a faltering step that needs to be picked up and carried on. Seen in this manner, their theological critics have done us a yeomen service. Their criticism has enabled us to see that the pluralists have neglected the tension between the two poles of the Anselmian definition of theology by making a second order discourse to become not a propaedeutic but a substitute for first order theology. It has made us aware that in treating one's own faith horizon as "one among many" Hick has not merely made the outsider his intended addressee but also adopted the standpoint of someone who is an outsider to any lived religion in favour of a theoretical abstraction. The critics of pluralism, on the other hand, remained focussed on the first order theology and have neglected the other pole of the tension.

The pluralists' theory then, can be seen as an attempt at a new propaedeutic to first order theology of religions. They may have failed in the attempt, but they do point to a neglected aspect of contemporary fundamental theology. Only by responding to this neglect can fundamental theology become what it seeks to be: "the meeting point for faith and reason, theology and philosophy, revelation and the world."[53] Only then will the lost balance between first order Christian theology and a second order theory of dialogue, lived religion that guides one's life and the scientific study of religions where one's religion is one among many, be recovered. The task that the pluralists set out to do, therefore, still remains. It is the task of developing a fundamental theology suitable for dialogue that does not substitute a theology of religions.

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[52]Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions,* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002, 110; John Hick, ed., *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, 185.

[53]Cahill, "Fundamental Theology," 27.