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Other Religions: A Christian Appraisal

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INTRODUCTION

Judging by the number of new books published in the last three years on the subject area of religious pluralism, this is an issue that is of increasing concern among evangelicals in particular, along with Christianity at large. In city streets, on television screens, at workplaces and on campuses, we are all greeted by the cacophony of alternative religions and world views. Whether through the migration of people or the development of communication technology, the fact of pluralism is here to stay. Perhaps the radical theologians, John Hick and Paul Knitter among them, have done more than any to bring this set of issues into focus and to shape the agenda of discussion.

MAPPING THE DEBATE

Alan Race described Christian appraisals of other religions in terms of three models (Race 1993). Gavin D'Costa promoted them further (D'Costa 1986). Subsequently, there have been interesting modifications and rejections of this particular approach to mapping the debate. The central problem in trying to classify Christian interpretations of other religions concerns the exact theological position around which theologians are supposed to cluster. Each model revolves around two axiomatic questions. The first is the question of the source of truth which might include revelation, reason, creation, human sin or the activity of Satan. The second question concerns the extent of God's (or "the Divine's") saving activity which ranges from the salvation of a tiny fraction of the full historical and global sweep of the human population to the salvation of everyone without exception.

(a) Pluralism

At one extreme lies the "pluralist" theology of religions, perhaps best exemplified by the work of John Hick ("pluralism" in this sense identifies a particular theory; the word can simply identify the observed fact that the United Kingdom is a nation of diverse religious allegiances). Concerning the source of truth, this position is based on philosophical relativism and scepticism at least with regard to religious knowledge. There are no absolute religious truths available to us. Furthermore, Hick asserts that "we are obeying the intellectual Golden Rule of granting to others a premise on which we rely ourselves" (Hick 1989 p.149), when we extend our sense of the limitations of human knowledge beyond the boundaries of our own communities to the believers of all religions. Every religion exists, worships and develops its philosophy in a state of ignorance.

A parable originally told by the Buddha is often (mis-)used at this juncture to describe the pluralist case. A king sent for ten servants whom he blindfolded and sent into his courtyard where there stood an impressive Indian elephant. Each servant was instructed to use their remaining senses to identify the thing before them. One, catching hold of its tail, identified it as a snake. Another, feeling a leg, thought it the bark of a tree while yet another mistook the tusk for a spear. The dilemma of the religious person is that they mistake their limited, partial knowledge for an absolute grasp of supernatural reality. Doctrines, creeds and scriptures are linguistic attempts to state the ineffable religious experiences of the great saints or mahatmas of religious history. Concerning the question of salvation

the pluralist will tend to be a universalist. Any hope or promise regarding limitless good beyond the grave is extended to all without exception.

Much effective criticism has already been levelled at this account. Two things might be said about the general position.

1. Regarding, the parable of the elephant there is an irony in that whoever would use the story must claim for themselves the position of the King: a full, impartial, unrestricted sight of the Real that lies behind all the pathetic groping in the dark we call religions. Of course, they are entitled to make such a claim if they wish, but the sceptical arguments that they deploy so deftly come back to haunt them: How can they be sure that even the King has such a clear view of the real situation *vis-a-vis* the servants and the elephant? Their position is just as absolute and exclusivist as any of the major world religions. The pluralist position is bedevilled by this inner contradiction: What it denies to others it seeks to maintain for itself - the exact opposite of an intellectual equivalent to the "Golden Rule"!
2. Regarding universalism, the question is how anyone has the relevant data to assert anything so optimistic? Why should existence be extended beyond death? Hick points to evidence from near-death experiences and parapsychology to substantiate his claim. Whatever such flimsy data may suggest, it is far from clear how it can corroborate such a wide-sweeping claim as universal salvation.

(b) Exclusivism

If pluralism stands at one extreme, then "hard" exclusivism represents the other. Exclusivism tends to be characterised as a matter of degree from the hard (or "no room for optimism" position) to the soft (or "optimistic") position. The hard-line exclusivist maintains that there is no salvation outside of explicit confession of Christ and no source of true revelation outside of Christ. Such exclusivism is, perhaps, better understood by another term in common use: "restrictivism". It restricts salvation in a significant way. Loraine Boettner argues for such a position (Boettner 1957) by claiming, on the basis of God's sovereign will, that anyone who dies outside the reach of

the gospel, God never intended to save:

"When God places people in such conditions we may be sure that he has no more intention that they shall be saved than He has that the soil of North-ern Siberia, which is frozen all year round, shall produce crops of wheat." (p.120)

Whoever would affirm restrictivism must categorically deny salvation to those who have not confessed Christ as their Saviour and Lord. One may admire the relentless logic of Boettner's position, but surely one is also entitled to question the compatibility of this statement with the biblical material on the desire of God to save all (such as 1 Timothy 2:3-4 or John 3:16-17)? Certainly if those who died before their rational faculties were sufficiently developed or who never developed the kind of faculties required to hear and consciously repent are classed among the unevangelised, then the problem becomes intense. Consequently, many evangelicals maintain the optimistic exclusivist case: All salvation is through the atoning work of Christ, but it is unclear how much conscious knowledge is necessary to appropriate this salvation. Helm makes a case for just such an "opaque" exclusivism (Cameron 1992 p.257ff).

(c) Inclusivism

Perhaps this model has attracted most Christian thinkers into its path during recent years. D'Costa characterises the position as "one that affirms the salvific presence of God in non-Christian religions while still maintaining that Christ is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God" (D'Costa 1986 p.80). It is interesting to note that highly influential inclusivist theologies have tended to be a product of Roman Catholic schools of thought in the wake of Vatican II. In common with pluralists, the inclusivist theologian will maintain God's desire to save all people and His good purposes within non-Christian religions. In keeping with the exclusivists, he or she will maintain that all God's saving activity is through Christ. Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner maintains that, if a non-Christian has responded positively to God's grace through their own religion, then they are already in a saving relationship with Christ, though they would not themselves describe it in these terms. D'Costa notes that for Rahner "salvation cannot be divorced from Christ, hence the term 'anonymous Christian' is more appropriate than 'anony-

mous theist'." (p.87). However, given Rahner's conviction that the point of media-tion is the Church, one wonders whether the term "anonymous Catholic" would not be more appropriate still.

EVANGELICALISM AND A NEW MODEL

This diversity of responses to religious plurality is reflected within evangelicalism. Currently, there is a major shift underway among evangelical opinion both in the pew and in the academy. In recent writings of such notable evangelicals as John Stott, Clark Pinnock, Peter Cotterell and Norman Anderson a more positive assessment of other religions has been developed. None of these writers dispute the necessity of the atonement or the uniqueness of Christ, but each argues for a more optimistic attitude towards the ultimate destiny of the adherents of other religions. In some cases, this shift of attitude has developed into a new model for the appraisal of other religions. It is no longer clear that the function of non-Christian religion is entirely negative. Many evangelicals follow this trajectory from exclusivism into inclusivism or at least into a fourth hybrid model that gleans insights from both of these models. We will finish our brief analysis with three cautions regarding this shift in evangelic-al theology. These three considerations are offered as essential threads that should run through any truly Christian appraisal of other religions.

A Christian Appraisal is Christological

If the focus of Scripture is Jesus Christ and his significance to both Jew and Gentile, then that focus must no less be our own. This focus must be developed in the context of Christian theological reflection, and only with this as a necessary presupposition of enquiry can a proper Christian engagement with other religions take place. A biblical doctrine of the person and work of Christ will predetermine, to some extent, the assessment of any alterna-tive route to salvation not connected to him. It is notable that the shift away from exclusivism to other positions, and particu-larly to the pluralist model, is often accompa-nied by a shift in the status and significance of Jesus Christ. In this regard, it is not enough to affirm the uniqueness of Christ. This tells us nothing in itself as every individual person is unique in some sense. Nor is it sufficient to affirm the necessity of salvation through Christ if the term "Christ" is

in some way divorced from the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth. The affirmation of Christian theol-ogy that will be presupposed in its appraisal of other religions is the uniqueness of Christ as the Lord God incarnate in the historical person called Jesus. This Christological focus will also present a challenge to Christian self-assessment as the focus is on Christ himself, not on the Church or on Christianity. A Christ-centred appraisal of other religions will not assume that all historic claims to be Church or to be Christian are always manifes-tations of the body of Christ in the world. To assert that Jesus Christ is the supreme Word of God to the exclusion of all other claimants is not to assert that the history of Christianity has always been superior to that of other religions.

A Christian Appraisal is Shaped by the Biblical Narrative

The Bible is not primarily a series of doctrinal propositions but the unfolding history of God's plan of salvation. For this reason it is the narrative as a whole that must shape a Christian appraisal of other religions. The very meaning of terms such as "salvation", "revelation' and "religion" must be deter- by this narrative. Indeed, one must question whether recent treatments of pluralism have adopted non-biblical definitions of salva-tion and religion in order to make their claims. To describe "salvation" as the turn from self-centredness to reality-centredness (Hick) is to make only a vague reference to the biblical meaning of salvation as becoming a part of the covenant community of God's people revealed in the Bible. The possibility of some who have never been evangelised being saved by God is a legitimate area of cautious speculation, but it must always be controlled by the way in which God's saving purposes have been revealed in Scrip-ture, particularly with its focus on the atoning work of Christ.

A Christian Appraisal is Full of Grace and Truth

Often discussions of pluralism labour the theme of tolerance as if this were the cardinal virtue of all modern liberalism. One would certainly want such discussions to be marked by respect and understanding. However, tolerance is not an end in itself. The Christian will be convinced that

when error is commended, whether by Christians or those of other religions, then one must critique error and set forth the truth plainly (2 Cor. 4:2). If by "tolerance" one means that this should be done with gentleness and respect, then that is granted. However, more often it seems that the word is used to divert attention from the need to debate and argue profoundly important divergent truth claims. There is a need to resist the development of an overarching framework, based on secular concepts rather than biblical thought, into which other religions must be squeezed and distorted. Instead, the Christian attitude will be one of patience and humility as one listens to the self-descriptions of religious traditions and allows that they may be treated as genuinely different rather than as anonymous vehicles for some under-specified "gospel" we are supposed to share.

CONCLUSION

The current cultural and intellectual forces arising from the incoherent combination of an increasingly secular and pluralist society do demand fresh thinking on the nature of religion, mission and dialogue. Pressing concerns include the relationship between saving faith and special revelation, the significance of general revelation and the need to distinguish church from culture. The range of evangelical responses will continue to grow in the immediate years ahead, and the priority for Christians will be to develop their grasp of biblical theology so that their treatment of the pressing issues will be based upon the person of Christ and the unfolding revelation of Scripture and marked by a Christian commitment that is both humble and bold.

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