

SEMINAR ON THE NATURE AND METHOD OF THEOLOGY

"From Anonymous to Analogous Christianity: the Pluralist-Inclusivist Debate"

As the title of his paper implies, James F. X. Pratt (Holy Cross) suggests a possible avenue of exploration beyond the pluralist-inclusivist standoff over the relation between Christianity and other world religions. Pratt began by aligning himself with Karl Rahner's opinion, expressed in 1966, that the breakdown of cultural isolation means that we are all now one another's spiritual neighbors. Pratt then indicated his intention to address his chosen topic in two stages. In the first, he would examine the strengths and weaknesses of the inclusivist and pluralist positions, and in the second present a notion of revelation that would, from the Christian standpoint, help start a genuine dialogue with other world religions.

For Pratt, while the exclusivist view of Christianity as the true religion has been largely surpassed, the advances both of inclusivism and pluralism have been squandered in intrachurch polemics between the two schools of thought. Pluralists, he explained, start from the doctrine of the universal salvific will of God, and go on to argue the complementarity of world religions. While this position leads to a suitable humility and an optimism about the possibilities of dialogue, it leaves pluralists open to the charge that they play down the particularity of religious traditions, and even that their fundamental conviction of universal salvation—based on Christian theological principles—may make them "anonymous inclusivists." Inclusivists, on the other hand, while they recognize the possibility of salvation being found in other religions, also subscribe to the exclusivist view that all salvation occurs in Christ. Thus, wondered Pratt, are they in fact able to engage in authentic dialogue, and are they not really only "anonymous exclusivists"? Concluding this section of the paper, Pratt alluded to Kenneth Surin's dismissal of all three positions because of their shared cultural imperialism, and inattention to the concrete histories and traditions of the other religions with which they propose to enter into dialogue. While he did not pursue Surin's argument further, he allied himself with Surin's wish to move beyond the exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist options.

Pratt's constructive proposal began with the wish to draw the dialogue with other world religions and the doctrine of revelation into relationship with one another, as it were, to read Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate* through the lens of *Dei*

Verbum. The former brief document, said Pratt, shows the Church for the first time recognizing other religions as true and holy ways of living, through which, not in spite of which, God saves individuals. The latter and much longer document moved the Church away from a propositional view of revelation to one of God's self-disclosure in a dialogue between God and humanity. So, argued Pratt, *Dei Verbum* created the conditions for genuine world ecumenism. The encounter with God that could occur in any religious tradition, he seemed to be saying, would be genuinely revelatory, since revelation was no longer focused on propositions. Moreover, since this is a dialogical event of revelation, there would have to be a "from-below" as well as a "from-above" component, and that might lead to the conclusion that other historical paradigms of revelation than that of Judaism-Jesus-Christianity might have to be contemplated. Pratt concluded his paper by enlisting the support of Aloysius Pieris, in the concrete instance of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, for his contention that interreligious dialogue is a discussion between two culturally conditioned ways of languaging revelation as the one self-communicative event.

The two formal respondents to Pratt's paper were appreciative but challenging. Joseph DiNoia (Dominican House of Studies) made four points, two minor and two major. First, he thought that while it might be important to get beyond the pluralist-inclusivist debate, the focus should not be shifted away from the question of salvation. Second, he challenged Pratt's reading of the Vatican II documents, specifically his claim that *Nostra Aetate* saw other religions as salvific. In DiNoia's view, the Council saw them as *possibly* true and holy, and therefore worthy of attention. Third, DiNoia quoted Pratt's claim that "God's self-disclosure . . . is a constitutive feature of religion," and pointed to the possible theistic imperialism of such a view. DiNoia suggested finding a way to talk of revelation that is "scheme-specific." Finally, DiNoia argued that the doctrine of revelation is being stretched too far in Pratt's analysis. It exists to secure the truth-claims of Christianity, not those of other religions. Moreover, there are not two tracks to revelation: so-called general revelation is only subsidiary to and only recognizable because of special revelation. Maybe it would be better to turn to talk of the Holy Spirit.

Leonard Swidler (Temple University) thought that the focus on revelation from below could be helpful, and stressed that there is no difference between revelation (from above) and discovery (from below). He suggested that what we need in order to mediate the expression of essentially different (though true) expressions of reality is a kind of "ecumenical Esperanto," though it would be important to remember that Esperanto, while a means of communication, is never as rich as the original languages themselves. He ended by opining that the epistemological claim must nevertheless be addressed, and so the pluralist-inclusivist discussions cannot be entirely abandoned. And, he remarked, Pratt is a pluralist.

The subsequent general discussion among the thirty or so people present focused on the possibility and value of revelation "from below," on Romantic understandings of revelation, and on the distinct possibility that the doctrine of revelation was in danger of being asked to do too much.¹

PAUL LAKELAND
Fairfield University
Fairfield, Connecticut

¹See "A 'Politics of Speech'," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1990) 192-212.