

## THE IMPACT OF WORLD RELIGIONS ON ACADEMIC AND ECCLESIAL THEOLOGY

The topic for discussion—that the impact of world religions has created both tension and promise for the relation between academic and ecclesial theology—was presented in four theses:

### *Thesis I* *A New Context and New Tensions for the Public Nature of Theology*

(1) "All theology is public discourse" (D. Tracy) in which every theologian must address, in differing degrees, the three publics of society, the academy, and the church. (2) Between the plausibility structures of all three publics, there are inevitable tensions, which can be either creative or disruptive for theology and Church. (3) One of the greatest sources of tension between the public of the academy and the public of the Church is the new awareness of religious pluralism in the public of society; this new awareness can be described as a "second axial period" (T. Berry), in which humanity is embracing a "critical, corporate consciousness" (W. C. Smith).

The third part of this thesis asserts that the question of the *many religions* (along with the question of the *many poor*) forms one of the most pressing and promising "signs of the times" confronting contemporary theology. Today, as never before, we recognize not just the existence but the *value* of other religious traditions. Our acquaintance with other religions is such that we sense, more and more, the need for *all* of them to contribute to humankind's pursuit of truth. This new awareness of religious pluralism forms part of a larger and new cultural context—a "Second Axial Period" in which the critical, individual consciousness of the First Axial Period (K. Jaspers) is being subsumed into a new critical, *communal or corporate* consciousness. Humanity today—individuals, nations, cultures, religions—are coming to realize that they cannot make it alone, that they cannot pursue truth and a better world alone. We need the other, the other who is really different from us—the stranger, the foreigner. "The 100 percent American, or Russian, or what have you (Christian!), is an enemy to all of us. We need an element of world citizenship in each person" (C. Hartshorne).

### *Thesis II* *A New Way of Doing Academic Theology*

(1) Many academic theologians are coming to recognize that a knowledge of and dialogue with world religions is an essential part of the data and praxis without which they cannot carry out the theological task; theology today must be global and dialogical. (2) Specifically, the encounter with world religions is changing

the task and self-definition of all three branches of theology: foundational, systematic, and practical. (3) Academic theologians who have studied and passed over to other world religions, tend to view truth as pluralistic, relational and progressive rather than as one, absolute and unchanging; similarly, they suggest that the history of religions (salvation history) is essentially "many" rather than anonymously or eschatologically "one."

1. The central assertion of this thesis was stated succinctly and challengingly in W. C. Smith's plenary address at last year's CTSA convention: "I would contend that it is impossible adequately to understand the course of human history, except theologically; and it is impossible adequately to theologize, except in awareness of world history (and of the history of religions)" (*Proceedings*, 1984, p. 53). For Christian theologians to draw conclusions on the nature of God, self, world, sin, creation, salvation without some awareness of what other traditions have contributed to these questions would be as intellectually and ethically questionable as it would be for an anthropologist to arrive at conclusions concerning human nature from a study of only one culture.

2. More precisely, a global-dialogical *fundamental theology* recognizes that it can carry out its task of establishing the *praeambula fidei* or starting points for theology only in dialogue with other religions; only in a confrontation with others, with those who think or start differently, can Christians become aware of the real, the hidden, perhaps the ideological, presuppositions within their own Christian starting points. Furthermore, global fundamental theologians will attempt the utopian task of trying to elaborate theological or reflective starting points that would be common to all religions. Such shared starting points might be found either in shared mystical experience ("communion before communication," as Merton would put it) or in shared praxis towards liberation and social transformation.

A global-dialogical *systematic theology* would not simply aim at re-visioning Christian doctrines through the prism of Hinduism or Buddhism, that is, understanding Christianity better by understanding other religions. Global systematic theologians (like R. Panikkar and W. C. Smith) propose an even more utopian ideal: they aim at articulating Christian beliefs in such a way that these beliefs will be intelligible and coherent not only for Christians but also, at least to some degree, for believers of other traditions! In other words, a global systematic theology works from the persuasion that the cognitive claims of Christian tradition must somehow be true also for those of other traditions if these claims are genuinely to be true for Christians. The truth of each of us is, in some way, the truth of all of us.

In the arena of ethics or *practical theology*, the concerns of theology of liberation and the theology of religions join hands. In the face of the global evils of hunger, exploitation, and ecological devastation, religions of the world are called upon to elaborate a global practical theology grounded in a common praxis of social, economic, and political liberation. This praxis becomes the basis on which, as never before, believers and thinkers from different religions can speak to each other, challenge and criticize each other, as to how their beliefs, their views of the world, of the Ultimate and of the self can contribute to removing the evils now inflicting the poor and oppressed. Here we see how on the global level, practical theology merges with foundational theology.

3. Many academic theologians are becoming aware of the epistemological and ontological presuppositions in their model for a global-dialogical theology. Simply stated, pluralism or manyness seems to be an irreducible quality of the real; there will always be many different standpoints in our search for truth. This means, it seems, that there will always be many different religions. But like reality itself, the many religions are not a scattered, atomistic table of billiard balls. They are, rather, related and in need of each other; and through ever more creative relationships, there will be a greater unity and cooperation among religions; the unity, however, will never totally absorb the plurality. The history of religions—or, the history of salvation—is a “concordant discord” or a “unitive pluralism.”

This new model for truth and religious history, together with the actual dialogue with other believers, is leading a small, but growing, number of Christian academic theologians to recognize the difficulty, if not impossibility, of continuing to claim that there is one, final religion for all others and that all religions must find their fulfillment in the fullness and normativity of God's saving act in Jesus Christ. A shift from a normative-definitive to a dialogical-relative understanding of Christ and Christianity can be found among such theologians as R. Panikkar, J. Hick, S. J. Samartha, J. Pawlikowski, and most recently, William Thompson and L. Gilkey. These theologians, however, insist that relativity does not spell relativism. Though the truth of one's religion is not final and absolute, it is still life-giving and able to call forth total commitment. One remains fully committed to one's own way but at the same time fully open to others.

### *Thesis III*

#### *The Tension between Academic and Ecclesial Theology*

*(1) When academic theologians attempt to communicate and pursue their global, dialogical method of theology within the public of the Church, they find themselves in tension, even contradiction, with the plausibility structures of Christian tradition and the magisterium. (2) Also, their new way of theology does not seem to arise out of or be “received” by the sense of the faithful. (3) The central source of tension seems to be the clash between academic theology's understanding of truth and religious history as pluralistic and ecclesial theology's understanding of Jesus Christ as God's unique, definitive, and normative revelation.*

The reasons why academic global theologians often find themselves in tension with their tradition and magisterium and why their new views seem to find such poor “reception” by the sense of the faithful sift down, it seems, to Christology. To suggest the inadequacy of Christian revelation by itself, to insist on the necessity of dialogue, to argue the independent validity and abiding plurality of many ways, both now and in the future—all this implies that Jesus Christ is not the final, definitive, normative revelation and saving act of God that Christians have long affirmed him to be. For many academic theologians, to follow through with such suggestions would run counter to the responsibility they feel towards the public of the Church.

This tension between academic and ecclesial theology became clear to organizers of a conference to be held at Claremont, California (March 1986) that will gather theologians willing to explore the new directions in the Christian theology of religions outlined in Thesis II. Besides the number of theologians who expressed eagerness to join the project (R. Panikkar, R. Ruether, G. Kaufmann, S. J. Samartha, A. Pieris, S. Yagi, M. Suchocki, L. Gilkey), there were many who had to decline, mainly because of the clash they felt between the intent of the conference and their identity as ecclesial theologians. G. Baum wrote: "While I am open to God's presence in other religions, I would be most hesitant to abandon the traditional position of God's definitive self-revelation in Jesus Christ. My best wishes for your useful project." H. Küng stated publicly at a conference at Temple University (October, 1984) that although to move in the direction of a non-definitive Christology might make logical sense, he could not make this move mainly because it would alienate him from his faith community. In a personal letter, M. Hellwig encapsulated the feelings of many: "I theologize decidedly from inside the tradition, and am unwilling to set out any theory which I think the Catholic community of believers (the community we actually have, with its actual hierarchic structure) cannot possibly accept as consonant with its faith. . . . We come to the anchor of Christian faith when we speak of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ." Other theologians who hesitate to endorse the intent of the Claremont conference are J. Cobb and D. Tracy.

#### *Thesis IV* *Can the Tensions be Resolved? How?*

*(1) Is the tension between academic and ecclesial theology on the issue of religious pluralism creative or disruptive for theology and church life? This question cannot be ignored; nor can it be facilely answered either in the name of "tradition" or in the name of "modernity." Rather, the tension must be accepted and lived with in order to be resolved. (2) As a guideline in trying to resolve this tension, theologians, both academic and ecclesial, can bear in mind that theologians also have a "magisterium"; to be faithful to this role, theologians must often be both doctors and prophets, teachers and leaders. (3) The "primacy of orthopraxis over orthodoxy" is a practical guideline for resolving the tension between academic and ecclesial theology: the "right doctrine" concerning the uniqueness of Christ and the value of other religions will result from—not precede—the "right practice" of interreligious dialogue and mutual efforts towards liberation.*

1-2. In urging that we not seek any quick or facile solutions to the tension between academic and ecclesial theology on the issue of religious pluralism, this thesis does suggest that the question be grappled with boldly and resolutely. It can be neither swept under a magisterial rug nor thrown out of the window of modernity. Exercising a "*magisterium cathedrae magistralis*" (balancing the "*magisterium cathedrae pastoralis*" of the bishops), theologians bear a distinctive authority and responsibility that are vital to the life of the Church; they must wear the authority humbly and exercise their responsibility resolutely. Theologians must often lead and push and prod the bishops and the faithful instead of only reflecting, or reflecting upon, their teachings and experience. In taking on such a role, theo-

gians need not be surprised if the "reception" of their teachings or suggestions may not come so quickly; as the bishops themselves have discovered with their recent pastoral letters on peace and the economy, it may take a while for the "sense of the faithful" to catch on and catch up. Perhaps the issue of world religions is one in which theologians must rush in where bishops and faithful fear to tread; such episcopal or congregational fears can be overcome. Besides, it has been the experience of some theologians that many of the faithful, in both undergraduate classrooms and adult education classes, are much more open to, and even receptive of, academic theology's new ideas on the validity of other faiths and the non-finality of Christ than Hellwig and Küng estimate.

3. In resolving this tension, academic and ecclesial theologians might learn something from the method of liberation theology. The liberationists insist that although there is an integral bond between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, Christianity is primarily a matter of orthopraxis—of following Christ—before it is a matter of clearly and conclusively stating or defining the nature of Christ. In fact, liberation theologians tell us, such "right believing" and doctrinal clarity can result only from the living of the Gospel as best we can and then reflecting on this praxis as best we can. Applied to our question, this would mean that the task at hand for both academic and ecclesial theologians is to carry on with the orthopraxis of dialoguing with other world religions and, especially, working with them to further the process of liberation and social-political transformation. In order to engage in this praxis, it is not necessary, or possible, to insist on the normative uniqueness or superiority of Christ over other revelations. In fact, just what this uniqueness means, whether and how much other religions are to be fulfilled in Christ, can result only from an open-ended, confessional dialogue and liberative cooperation with other religions. The task of the Christian Church, right now, is not to proclaim "Lord, Lord" or "Only Jesus, only Jesus," but to *do* the will of the Father and seek first the Kingdom.

#### *Discussion*

There seemed to be a consensus concerning the importance and urgency of coming to a more coherent and dialogically effective understanding of the value of other religions and of Christianity's relation to them. But a number of participants suggested, in different ways, that although there is a tension between academic and ecclesial theology on this issue, the presenter may have described this tension too sharply, perhaps too neatly. For instance, can one be so certain that the new experience of religious pluralism within a "second axial period" requires one to abandon or even to modify Christianity's traditional understanding of Christ as the unique and definitive revelation of God? Even within the new pluralistic, relational, and processive model of truth and religious history (Thesis II), it is logically possible, even practically desirable, that there be one "standpoint" or revelation that serves as the focus and dynamism for the ongoing search for truth and building of the Kingdom. Such a standpoint would be normative for and above all the others.

It was pointed out how real-life interreligious dialogue gives us occasion to explore such a possibility of a "superior" standpoint. What does one do, for instance, when the "other" in the dialogue is a fundamentalist—Christian or Mus-

lim or Hindu—who insists that her/his understanding or “savior” is the only or the best? According to the proposed new “critical, corporate consciousness” (Thesis I), we must accept the others as others and try to learn from them. A more methodological statement of the same concern was the warning that the model proposed in Thesis II can easily preempt the flow and outcome of dialogue; it seems to impose a given model of truth and dialogue—e.g., excluding absolutes—before the experience and insights of the dialogue have been registered.

A number of participants endorsed the need to revise Christianity’s traditional understanding of uniqueness and normativity, even if they were not clear as to how this might be done. One suggestion was that the theologians who are hesitant to pursue the program of the Claremont conference might overcome their hesitation if they would base their understanding of revelation and religion not on Christology but on pneumatology. Expanding on a recent suggestion made by Fredrick Crowe (“Son of God, Holy Spirit, and World Religions: The Contribution of B. Lonergan to the Wider Ecumenism,” Regis College, November 26, 1984), one participant argued that the primary ground and ultimate criterion for all of God’s revealing activity is the Spirit, not Jesus Christ.

Concerning the problem of reception by the faithful (Thesis III), a participant from India pointed out that perhaps this is a problem primarily for Western, first-world local churches who have not really experienced the reality and challenge of other faiths. Perhaps the tensions between academic and ecclesial theology concerning Christianity and other religions can really be resolved only in the churches of Asia and Africa.

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