

## **‘The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions’: The Edinburgh 1910 Commission IV Report and Beyond**

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We have gathered to consider the Report of Commission IV on *The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions*, which came out of the famous missionary conference held here in Edinburgh in 1910; and to reflect on how that important theme has been addressed in the Church since those momentous days. Professor David Cairns, the Chairman of Commission IV, when analysing the two hundred answers that were received in response to his questionnaire sent to missionaries and church leaders around the world, must have felt as awed and inadequate as I do today in reviewing the literature of the past century. For Cairns testified that not a few of those answers ‘were of a length and an importance that would have justified their separate publication’. Indeed, Temple Gairdner, in his official account of the proceedings of the conference, tells us that ‘by common consent’ the Report that was presented by the Commission on the fourth day of the conference for general discussion was ‘one of the most remarkable, perhaps the most remarkable, of a great series.’<sup>1</sup>

There is, of course, a vast gulf that separates us from our Edinburgh forebears of 1910. Three hugely significant differences between their world and ours emerge from a perusal of the Commission IV Report. Firstly, the racial, linguistic, denominational and theological complexion of the global Christian world has utterly been transformed in the twentieth century. The Report writers and respondents were overwhelmingly of the stock of white Western males who dominated the ecclesiastical and missionary centres of power. No African spoke for African Christianity, nor were there any representatives from indigenous churches outside the European world. It is Western Christendom that informs their conversation and constitutes its background.

Secondly, they were denizens of global empire, with the European nations and their former colonies in the Americas having political and economic control over 80% of the surface of the globe. Not only have nationalism and de-colonization in Asia and Africa been prominent features of the twentieth century, but Europeans now inhabit an intellectual world which is cynical towards all global projects except the march of global consumerism and a narrowly-defined set of universal rights.

Thirdly, while they were deeply concerned about the insidious threat of Western secularism and materialism on traditional ways of life, they could not foresee that modernity would develop in different ways in different societies, and even lead to a resurgence, rather than the diminution, of religious identities in politics and national life. So convinced were they of the ‘finality and absoluteness of Christianity’ (which they could not distinguish from the ‘finality and absoluteness of Christ’) that the thought that Christianity would rapidly recede in Europe, while taking on new configurations in Sub-Saharan Africa, Korea or China, lay beyond their imaginations.

Nevertheless, reading through the Report of Commission IV almost a hundred years later, one is struck not only by the gulf that divides our world from theirs, but also by a striking resonance with issues and concerns of our own day. It was perhaps a trifle unfair of the missiologist David Bosch to label Edinburgh a ‘how to’ conference, the climax of American-inspired pragmatism. While it may have begun that way, one can only be humbled by the recognition in the Report’s conclusion that ‘the success of the missionary enterprise depends

in the last issue, not on numbers, nor on wealth nor on organization' and the frequently expressed desire to cultivate not just methods but a 'living faith' and a 'living theology'.<sup>2</sup> And this re-vitalized theology is needed for the church 'at home' as much as for the churches abroad: 'There is assuredly more in God and in truth, and in that Gospel which is the truth of God, than we have yet attained.'<sup>3</sup>

The Report approached the religious faiths of humankind under five headings, organized in separate chapters: Animism, Chinese Religions, Japanese Religions, Islam, and Hinduism. The latter provided the Commission with the greater part of its material. Clearly it is the religions of India and China that caught the imagination of the missionary movement and attracted some of its most gifted personnel. The lack of attention to Buddhism in South-East Asia was acknowledged, the reason given being that only four responses had been received. One can only note the irony that Buddhism has been more successful than any of the other faiths in winning Western converts in the twentieth century, and its influence (through the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, for instance, or Edwin Arnold's epic poem on the life of the Buddha) was being felt in European intellectual circles even before the turn of the nineteenth century. Parallels are drawn in the Report between the work of contemporary churches and the missionary challenge that had faced the Early Church: for instance, Animism today and pagan polytheism in Greco-Roman society; Islam today and ancient Judaism in its 'legalistic conception of the God-man relationship'; Hindu Vedanta and the sophisticated intellectual systems of the Hellenist world.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, the Report of Commission IV is permeated by a sense of impending global crisis, perhaps a hangover from the apocalyptic pre-millennialism that marked much of the American missionary enterprise. With some prescience, the in-roads of an atheistic scientific naturalism into China and Japan are noted as potential catastrophes facing these nations. Paragraphs like the following, read with historical hindsight, are rather poignant: 'All history shows that without religion no civilisation can live. No man can tell the evils and the sorrow to China, and not to China alone but to the whole human race, that must follow the decay of religion throughout this great Empire. It would be far better for China to keep the religion that she has than to discard it for materialism and atheism.'<sup>5</sup> It is also fascinating to note that for the writers of the Report, 'There is perhaps no spiritual position in the missionary world of today of such strategic moment as the Island Empire of Japan,'<sup>6</sup> and that 'sooner or later the issues here, as in China, must be fought out between naturalism and Christianity.'<sup>7</sup>

It is customary to regard Edinburgh 1910 as the high point of missionary triumphalism, Western Christianity's reflection of the high noon of empire prior to the dark horrors of the First World War. The Report belies this perception. No doubt some of the military metaphors jar on the sensitive postmodern reader, as when the Report concludes with the oft-quoted words: 'The spectacle of the advance of the Christian Church along many lines of action to the conquest of the five great religions of the modern world is one of singular interest and grandeur.'<sup>8</sup> But what is rarely quoted are the words that immediately follow: 'But at least as remarkable as that spectacle of the outward advance of the Church is that which has also been revealed to us of the inward transformations that are in process in the mind of the missionary, the changes of perspective, the softening of wrong antagonisms, the centralising and deepening of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the growth of the spirit of love to the brethren and to the world.'<sup>9</sup>

The overwhelming impression conveyed by the respondents and the Report is that the Christian approach to the non-Christian religions and their adherents must be marked by deep

understanding, sympathy and respect. While our present vocabulary of ‘inter-faith dialogue’ may be missing, there is no doubt that most of those involved in the Report had been practising it to a remarkable extent. And their missionary experience of other faiths and cultures furnished a powerful challenge to Western Christianity. Anticipating the work of African theologians in the twentieth century, the Report dared to ask whether the animist worldview was not more helpful in understanding the Bible than ‘conventional Christianity’ and whether the post-Enlightenment ‘theological view of nature as a closed system, sporadically broken on rare historic occasions, [was] really philosophically sound or religiously sufficient?’<sup>10</sup>

Even Islam, the ‘great antagonist’ of the Gospel, was a model of ‘living faith’ and it was ‘this living faith, intenser, more intimate and more comprehensive than sight’, that the body of Christ had to recover if it was to have a credible witness in the world.<sup>11</sup> The Report dares to ask: ‘Have we in our modern theology and religion sufficiently recognised what Islam stands for - the unity and the sovereignty of God?’<sup>12</sup> Anticipating later scholarship of Christian-Muslim relations, it suggests that it is not ‘historically just’ to say that Muhammad rejected Christ, and laments that ‘The study of the conditions under which Islam came into being afford matter for heart-searching to Christendom.’<sup>13</sup> That same Christendom is chastised for ‘all the rapacity and violence of national policy’ towards China.<sup>14</sup> Temple Gairdner notes how, on the very first evening, one of the speakers had ‘most uncompromisingly pointed to the failure of western Christianity to solve her social question, as well as to Christianise the foreign and colonising policies of the western nations.’<sup>15</sup>

Seen against the background of an European and American world so assured of its civilizational superiority, these Christian self-criticisms were indeed extraordinary. Although they fall far short of the guilt-ridden *angst* of large sections of today’s older Western denominations, they were in advance of the general climate prevailing in the contemporary Western church and world. That climate was marked either by a lofty disdain towards whatever was foreign or an assimilation of Christianity into a natural universal religion. Commission IV manifests a new humility, despite the occasional triumphalist language. Along with a generous recognition of all that is true and good in the non-Christian religions, almost all the respondents share the ‘massive conviction’ that ‘Jesus Christ fulfils and supersedes all other religions’.<sup>16</sup> But it is precisely this conviction that led to the recognition that ‘they and we alike need a new discovery of God,’<sup>17</sup> and, what Gairdner calls the ‘working principle’ that guided the spiritual enterprise of the Commission: ‘since the Church of Christ itself is partially involved in mists of unbelief, failing aspiration, imperfect realisation, this quest of hers among the non-Christian religions, this discovery of their “broken lights” may be to her the discovery of facets of her own truth, forgotten or half-forgotten- perhaps even never perceived at all save by the most prophetic of her sons.’<sup>18</sup>

### **The ‘Fulfilment’ Model**

The language of ‘fulfilment’ vis a vis the relationship between Christianity and other faiths surfaces time and again in the Report, especially in the sections on Hinduism. But it is not a naive view of ‘fulfilment’. The Report recognizes that most of the papers received show a ‘combination of what to the superficial observer seem contradictory elements, their penetrating judgment of the evils of Hinduism and their generous and profound appreciation of that in it which is true and eternal.’<sup>19</sup> It drew a parallel between the theological effort in India and the work of the Alexandrine Fathers: ‘Indeed, at every turn one is reminded of the first meeting of Christianity and Hellenism in this meeting between Christian thought and the

strange blend of crude, popular polytheism with a deep and subtle esoteric philosophy which is found today in India.’<sup>20</sup>

Such was the generally sympathetic treatment given to Hindu religious thought and ideals that two native Indian readers objected to the Report as being inattentive to the view of native Indian converts to the Christian faith. Their experience of Hinduism from the ‘inside’ was not as ‘roseate’ as that of the foreign missionaries who often only had contact with the ‘best’ of Hinduism.<sup>21</sup> In this, they were pre-figuring what is today the dominant movement within Indian Christian theology, namely an affirmation of *dalit* consciousness and identity that champions Jesus as a fellow *dalit*, one who, in solidarity with his brethren, subverts the oppressive power of the cast-system and its underlying religious ideology.

In a concluding note, written after the Conference, the Commission responded to these objections in this way: ‘It is entirely true that Hinduism cannot be spoken of as a preparation for Christianity in anything like the same way as the Old Testament is such a preparation. No such view has ever been contemplated by the Commission. The analogy suggested in the Report is not with the Old Testament, but with Hellenism, which assuredly had the basest elements in it side by side with nobler things.’<sup>22</sup> It continued to remind its readers of ‘two types of thought on the question of the relation of the Gospel to existing religions’ which have existed from the earliest days of the Christian mission: namely, ‘the type exemplified in Tertullian and in Origen- the one dwelling most on the evils of those religions and the newness of the Gospel; and the other seeking to show that all that was noblest in the old religions was fulfilled in Christ. This duality of type goes right back to the very beginnings of Christianity, and is found in the New Testament itself. It seems quite clear that both types are necessary to the completeness of the Christian idea.’<sup>23</sup>

The counterpoint between ‘Tertullian and Origen’ was to be played out in the decades ahead. Edinburgh 1910’s greatest legacy to the Christian Church lay in its setting up of a continuation committee in the form of the International Missionary Council to further the dialogue among Christians from all church affiliations and cultural backgrounds on the nature and practice of the missionary calling. The Commission issued a strong appeal for deeper study of other religious traditions ‘because the most direct way into the human heart of both Animist and Hindu and Moslem will be the study of what he holds most precious.’<sup>24</sup> An international journal was founded, under the editorship of J.H. Oldham himself, the Secretary of the conference, and it was in these pages that much of the ensuing debates were initiated.

The ‘fulfilment’ approach dominated missionary and native Christian thinking in India right upto the IMC conference in Jerusalem (1928). Keshub Chander Sen was probably the first within the Indian nineteenth-century context to have used the term ‘fulfilment’ to describe the relationship of Christ to other religions. Max Müller’s evolutionary view of religious development seems to have been the main influence on Sen’s understanding of fulfilment, though many high-caste Indian converts applied the New Testament account of Christ’s and the early Christians’ reading of the Jewish scriptures to shape their own approach to their Hindu traditions. They still do today. And it is interesting to note that some African theologians continue to apply the fulfilment motif to their own pre-Christian religious experience. For John Mbiti, for instance, ‘The Gospel enabled [African] people to utter the name of Jesus Christ...that final and completing element that crowns their traditional religiosity and brings its flickering light to full brilliance.’<sup>25</sup>

J. N. Farquhar and A.G. Hogg came to represent the two poles of the ‘fulfilment’ debate in the period immediately before Edinburgh and until Jerusalem.<sup>26</sup> Farquhar’s *The Crown of Hinduism*, published in 1913, and Hogg’s *Karma and Redemption*, published a few years before Edinburgh, quickly became essential reading for missionaries serving in India. Their different standpoints have often been exaggerated by later commentators. Their differences lay, less in different assessments of Hinduism or the uniqueness of the Christian message, than in matters of emphasis and of missionary approach. For Hogg, instead of asking what elements in Hinduism presented ‘points of contact’ with Christianity and constitute a preparation for it, it was better to ask ‘where one can most readily create in the Hindu consciousness points of contact with the Christian consciousness, and thereby prepare the way for an Indian type of Christianity.’ The Christian’s aim should be to ‘intensify’ a dissatisfaction with the ‘individualist ideals’ of Hinduism: ‘inspire the Hindu mind with the sense that its ideal is too narrow, that its attainment leaves the world too full of misery and wrong, and you have prepared the way for the Kingdom of God.’<sup>27</sup>

These two missionary approaches- the one building on what is good and true in the religious faiths of humankind, the other subverting them by intensifying the dissatisfaction of their devotees and leading them to a Christological transformation- both presuppose a deep and sympathetic engagement with the lives and thought-worlds of others. The most stimulating missionary theologies have come, not from academic theologians writing about the ‘world religions’ in general, but from scholar-missionaries who have lived a large part of their lives within another, particular, religious culture - whether Hendrik Kraemer among rural Javanese Muslims, Kenneth Cragg in the world of Arabic Muslim intellectuals, Lesslie Newbigin as pastor to rural churches in south India, or Kosuke Koyama among Thai Buddhist villagers. Their writings reflect the complexities and ambiguities of all religious systems and ways of life. Even Kraemer, whose massive 450 page book *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* written (in just seven weeks!) for the 1938 Tambaram conference of the IMC has often been derided by religious pluralists for its Barthian denunciation of religion as human self-justification and idolatry, criticizes Barth for his (ironically) ‘undialectical thinking’ and ‘rationalistic’ arguments about religion.

Kraemer’s argument against a ‘rationalistic’ approach to discussing religions cuts in two directions, not only against Barth but also against his detractors. An Orientalist romanticism has marked several text-based defenders of ‘religion’. Peter Cotterell, himself a missionary in Ethiopia for many years, has complained that ‘in the contemporary debates about the world’s religions the religions are hopelessly idealized.... The horrors of Canaanite religions are still with us, the *shaman* still claims the power to manipulate his gods, witchcraft still flourishes, the credulous are exploited, human achievement is exalted, the rich are filled with yet more good things, and it is the poor who are sent empty away. The fact is that religions do not prepare their adherents for the revelation of Christ.’<sup>28</sup>

The sheer otherness of what is heard in the gospel story by people of other faiths cannot be downplayed. Whatever may be the relationship between the Gospel and non-Christian experience of God, it cannot be described in terms of continuity alone. Lesslie Newbigin never tired of reminding us that it was not the sages but ‘babes and sucklings’ (Matt.11:25) who received the Christ, while the highest in the land crucified him.

‘The message of Jesus, of the unique incarnate Lord crucified by the powers of law, morals, and piety and raised to the throne of cosmic authority, confronts the claim of every religion with a radical negation. We cannot escape this. Jesus comes to the representatives of the highest in human spirituality, as he came to Saul of Tarsus, as one who threatens the most sacred ground on which they stand. He appears as the saboteur, the subverter of the law.

It is only after his unconditional claim has been accepted that a man in Christ, like Paul the apostle, can look back and see that Christ has not destroyed the law but fulfilled it.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Transformation of Religions towards Christ**

Not surprisingly, Indian Christian theology in the post-independence period has had a third partner in its dialogue with the dominant Hindu religious schools: namely, Marxism. M.M Thomas and others have sketched the way that Hindu religious traditions were challenged, renewed and reconfigured under the combined impact of Christian and secular humanist discourses in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>30</sup> Thomas himself flirted with the Communist Party in his youth and retained a fierce commitment to the concept of secular history as ‘the realm of the unfolding of the divine purpose with the unique Christ-event given as its clue’. He called for a ‘Christ-centred syncretism’, meaning a transformation of all religions around Jesus’ liberating action for the poor and oppressed, and urged the Church to speak of this both in secularist and metaphysical categories.<sup>31</sup>

If Christ as the cosmic Lord of history transcends Christianity, then, Thomas points out, ‘the question whether Christ and *agape* are to be seen also as a spiritual ferment working within the Hindu society and Hindu religion to convert them to Christ and to judge and redeem them in him without destroying is not an irrelevant one.’ Further, when Hinduism ‘is engaged in a struggle to express a new idea of society more in tune with the Christian scheme, can this be considered in some sense a movement of Hinduism to Christ? Or again, when the trend in Hinduism is to seek to express spirituality more in moral and social than in metaphysical and mystical terms, what is our Christian estimate of such a search?’<sup>32</sup>

There are some similarities here to Kenneth Cragg’s theology of ‘retrieval’. Cragg is concerned with a Christian mission not only to individual Muslims but to the household of Islam.<sup>33</sup> He recognizes, more profoundly than does Thomas, that ‘the Christian gospel is conversionist through and through’,<sup>34</sup> and that the ‘ardent hospitality’<sup>35</sup> that flows out of the Christ-event seeks to retrieve and mend its distorted refractions elsewhere. ‘Our patience must undertake to differentiate the faith and the travesty... We must banish the suspicion that a conspiracy of silence would better serve to peace’.<sup>36</sup> We are summoned by the divine hospitality to exercise a like hospitality to unfamiliar and alien ways of thought and life, including where religion itself is neglected or denied outright. Christ ‘belongs to us only because he belongs to all. He is ours only by virtue of his universality’.<sup>37</sup> This calls for a ‘cross-referencing’ style of doing theology, paying close attention to the questions other faiths put to us in the pluralist situation, and openly speaking of Jesus as the Christ into ‘those thoughts and inklings of him in the comprehension of other religions’,<sup>38</sup> interpreting meaning across barriers of incomprehension. ‘This posture, at once hopeful and forthright, is consistent with the very nature of the gospel. It is determined to find allies wherever it can precisely because it has so much at issue. Since it is about God over all, it could not well do otherwise.’<sup>39</sup>

Thus Cragg confesses an incarnational Christology in dialogue with Islam, not by the traditional way of confrontation with Muslim views of Jesus, but by fully indwelling the Islamic discourse on missionary prophethood and moving that discourse towards the recognition that: ‘truth-bearing from God, *via* prophethood, to the human realm reveals a logic in which message and messenger become indistinguishable, word passes into life and life becomes the word. When it does so, given human passion and prophetic steadfastness, the word that becomes life is likely to be the life that becomes suffering.’<sup>40</sup>

Post-colonial Indian theologies have emerged from a context marked by fears of the subversion of the secular state by resurgent religious communalism, growing economic disparity and social oppression. The *dalit* theologians of India have largely rejected Thomas' approach as being too naive in its estimate of changes within Hindu religious society. For them Indian theology continues to work with 'symbolic forms, themes and media' that are 'not attuned to the religious sensibilities of the subaltern communities'. In contrast, they seek to put into circulation 'oppositional, discordant and anomalous voices that are generally suppressed and evicted.'<sup>41</sup> This has led to a celebration of the 'liberative traditions' buried among the religious practices of the poor, and an endorsement of 'spiritualities' found among tribal and peasant communities which are set in opposition to the dominant religious myths of caste Hindus. How far such readings of both biblical narrative and subaltern practices and traditions tend to be reductionistic need not concern us here.

### **The Pneumatological Approach**

What *is* of interest is the way that Roman Catholic theologians in India and elsewhere have begun to move from a Logos Christology to a Spirit Christology in dealing with religious pluralism. The shadow of Karl Rahner and of the Conciliar and post-Conciliar Vatican II documents falls on these theologies, but they are developed in different directions. Rahner's point of departure, like the Conciliar documents on which he exercised some considerable influence, was 1 Tim 2:4, 'the universal and salvific purpose of God towards all men', which he took to be actually effective 'for all men in all ages and places'.<sup>42</sup> This must imply that every 'individual ought to and must have the possibility in his life of partaking in a genuine and saving relationship to God, and this at all times and in all situations of the history of the human race.'<sup>43</sup>

Rahner's basic axiom is that all human being is oriented to self-transcendence, and that this orientation is prompted by the Spirit, who is the divine self-communication. For Rahner, the non-Christian religions are 'lawful religions' but only up to the 'time when the Christian religion becomes a historically real factor' for their adherents. A 'lawful religion' in Rahner's terms is 'an institutional religion whose "use" by man at a certain period can be regarded on the whole as a positive means of gaining the right relationship to God and thus for the attaining of salvation'. Religions become 'unlawful right from the moment when they [come] into real and historically powerful contact with Christianity.'<sup>44</sup> Rahner proposes, therefore, that

'Until the moment when the gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual, a non-Christian religion (even outside the Mosaic religion) does not merely contain elements of a natural knowledge of God, elements, moreover, mixed up with human depravity which is the result of original sin and later aberrations. It contains also supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to men as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ. For this reason, a non-Christian religion can be recognized as a lawful religion (although only in different degrees) without thereby denying the error and depravity contained in it.'<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, 'Christianity does not simply confront the member of an extra-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian, but as someone who can and must already be regarded in this or that respect as an anonymous Christian.'<sup>46</sup>

In a Rahnerian approach to inter-religious dialogue, then, we deal with others as people arranged along a spiritual continuum. Our position on that continuum is decided by how much of the divine self-communication we have recognized and accepted. We discern the

presence and love of God in others through dialogue, but this does not absolve Christians from the responsibility of sharing the gospel with others, because it brings to light the truth of which they are unaware- namely, that they are already creatures graced by God.

Rahner has been severely criticised by a number of commentators for the offensive paternalism implied by the term 'anonymous Christian'. But, in fairness to Rahner, this is not language he would have used in conversation with those outside the Church. Every world-view has to interpret and explain the experiences and beliefs of others in terms of its own basic categories. Since Rahner's thinking is Christocentric, he has to interpret the salvific value of other religions in Christological terms. We need to respect his desire to embrace Muslims, Hindus, Jews and others within the saving grace of God. His weakness, and one that he shared with many of his critics, is the way the argument from the universal saving purpose of God to the salvific efficiency of non-Christian religion assumes, without argument, that God's saving action is experienced in the sphere of 'religion' among all the activities of human beings. It is also unclear as to what constitutes the 'newness' in the 'good news' that Church is still called to proclaim.

As an example of one who has developed the post-Conciliar Vatican openness to salvation in other religions in a more radical pneumatological and political liberationist direction, I mention the Indian theologian, Samuel Rayan, who has also been a prominent participant in ecumenical Protestant conferences. Rayan makes the bold move, reminiscent of Hegel, of interpreting history as the movement of the Spirit across religious boundaries, bringing liberation and unity. Christ belongs to this 'history of the Spirit', which Rayan tends to identify with the Hindu concept of *shakti*, the universal divine energy, and of which Jesus Christ is but one instantiation. The Gospel is now re-interpreted as meaning 'that our life and our world stand bathed in the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God and of Jesus Christ.'<sup>47</sup> For Rayan, '[T]he suggestion that God provides for peoples' salvation only with the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth is unfair to God, too narrow for biblical perspectives, and too inept for a Spirit-led history of over 2 million years.' As Rayan sees it, 'The real question is whether the religions can now muster their resources to act together with the oppressed to struggle for the liberation of all and for a new-creative pro-existence.'<sup>48</sup> The Spirit works to conform human relationships to a socialist model of society. All authentic religious impulses are articulations of human struggles for socialism.

In the hands of Rayan and others, the concept of Spirit provides a way in which they can break out of what they see as the straitjacket of salvation-historical thinking, recognize truth and goodness in non-Christian peoples, and accord all histories equal significance. The irony of this approach is that it is a 'theology from above'; despite the intention to respect diverse faiths, it tends to turn the particular into an example of a general principle. If the Christian message to the world is reduced to the statement that in Jesus certain wonderful qualities such as love and justice were present in an exemplary manner, then we could dispense with the example once we had learned the lesson which the example teaches.

### **Unitary / Monological Pluralism**

The editors of the much-publicized symposium in 1987, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, expressed their confidence that 'a pluralist model represents a new turn- what might be called a "paradigm shift"- in the efforts of Christian theologians, both past and present, to understand the world of other religions and Christianity's place in that world.'<sup>49</sup> For the prolific John Hick, we must learn to think of the 'great world faiths' as equally valid

responses to the Ultimate Mystery (or 'The Real' in Hick's later writings). He makes use of the Kantian distinction between the Real *an sich*, i.e., in itself, and the Real as humanly experienced and thought. We have to distinguish between the Real *an sich* (beyond all human conception and expression) and the Real as variously experienced-and-thought by different human communities. The American Jesuit Paul Knitter similarly proposed a model of 'unitary pluralism', asserting that 'the world religions, in all their amazing differences, are more complementary than contradictory', and set a new 'goal and inspiration for missionary work' so that a process of 'mutual growth' may take place among people of all faiths and none, the success of which would be measured in terms of 'a Christian becoming a better Christian and a Buddhist a better Buddhist'.<sup>50</sup>

It is in this *normative and programmatic* sense that the word pluralism has come to function in contemporary Christian discussions. This approach calls for the systematic re-interpretation of all truth-claims that threaten harmony among people of all faiths. We can only speak, in a mythological way, of our culturally and historically conditioned perceptions of the Real/Transcendent, which are the religious traditions of humankind. The finished product, in each case, is unrecognizable to most adherents of the respective traditions. In a well-meaning attempt to dissolve conflict, Hick and his band of fellow-pluralists end up creating a new 'pluralist religion' that looks suspiciously like a religion tailored to suit the preferences of Western liberal intellectuals. Hick always speaks of the 'great world faiths' or the 'post-axial religions', writes disparagingly of the primal religions, and ignores the newer religious movements around the world. Similarly, Hans Küng is quite sure that 'one cannot place magic or belief in witches, alchemy, or the like, on the same level with belief in the existence of God...'<sup>51</sup> But why ever not? Because such phenomena do not fit comfortably within the liberal intellectual tradition to which most religious pluralists belong.

### **'Trinitarian' Religious Pluralisms**

Raimundo Panikkar, son of an Indian Hindu father and a Spanish Catholic mother, has, since the 1960s, vigorously championed an *oecoumene* of world faiths. He has sought to marry the personalism of the Semitic faiths with the *advaita*, non-dualist experience of Asian faiths in such a way that diversity is not dissolved but anchored in a transcendent Mystery. He affirms the irreducible plurality of the religious traditions of humankind, and then argues for their inter-penetration and mutuality on a different plane.

Panikkar is fond of river imagery. The history of the Christian tradition in its relation to other religions is symbolized by the three sacred rivers, the Jordan, the Tiber and the Ganges. These represent 'three kairological moments of Christic self-consciousness': in historical sequence, the Jordan represents the Messiah and Judaeo-Christian exclusivism; the Tiber the imperial expansion of Christianity into an inclusivist faith; and the Ganges the emerging pluralism of religious faiths. For Panikkar the Ganges is not Hinduism but the entire cosmos.<sup>52</sup>

For Panikkar, as indeed for many recent pluralist theologians, the Christian belief in God as Trinity provides a way of accounting for the divergent spiritualities that we encounter in the world of religions. Belief in an ineffable ultimate ground, some acknowledgment of a dialogical human relationship with the ultimate, and a sense of the limitless depth of our own being- these can all be found, without much difficulty, in the major religious traditions. Since the Christian doctrine of the Trinity has the *form* of a transcendent principle, a personal principle and an immanent principle, such a doctrine could be extended to serve as an

explanation for how the various spiritualities are possible and to assert that they are all grounded in the silence of the Ultimate.

However, this approach runs the risk of confusing *form* with both *content* and *goal*. For, even if we grant that there are ‘triadic’ patterns or ‘trinitarian’ structures running through the different religio-philosophical systems we encounter, and that conceptual borrowing from non-Christian religious systems may elucidate aspects of the Christian doctrine of God, it does not follow that the ultimate experience of *nirvana* or *satori* is equivalent to an experience of God, let alone salvation as understood in the Christian tradition. Human experience is not unmediated, but shaped by our overarching worldview. ‘Rather than speak of Buddhist doctrines as interpretations of Buddhist mystical experiences, one might better speak of Buddhist mystical experiences as deliberately contrived exemplifications of Buddhist doctrine.’<sup>53</sup> Thus neither concepts nor ‘spiritual experiences’ can be compared without paying attention to the narrative worlds in which they are embedded. The worship of God as Trinity did not arise from a speculative philosophy about God’s relation with the world, but from the heart of the gospel itself.

In an essay with Panikkar’s theology specifically in mind, Kevin Vanhoozer observes:

‘The doctrine of the Trinity is the result of a narrative identification of the Christian God. The Gospels “figure” God- by ascribing certain acts and a pattern of activity-as economic Trinity, as one who relates to the world through Spirit and Son. The ontological Trinity - the belief in the eternality of the triune God-is a “configuration” of this economic figuration.... In a pluralistic theology of religions, God is identified ontologically, by extrapolating from religious experience or through philosophical reflection; the various “economic” relations are considered incidental to the one God rather than constitutive revelations of the divine identity. The Fathers, however, identified the *one* God with the plurality of Father, Son, and Spirit. They thought of God equally in terms of oneness and threeness, and they did so by allowing the narrative to clarify and correct the philosophical identification of God.’<sup>54</sup>

In the Christian tradition, Jesus is the unifying point of reference for all the creative acts of God. The *eschaton* towards which our human life-stories are moving has a recognizable pattern only because of the life-story of Jesus. Human possibilities are defined with reference to Jesus who, as the Logos made flesh, not only becomes the authoritative form of human flourishing and response to God, but also brings the present disorder of reality into a new intelligibility and unity. So, while this intelligibility can never be captured in a theoretical scheme or by a single mind, and the fullness of Christ is still to be discovered in the unpredictable diversity of human histories, the divine action as Spirit is grounded in the divine action in Jesus, the incarnate Logos.

This is where Rahner, Rayan, Panikkar and others who follow them are vulnerable in their ‘Spirit’ terminology. If we are to think (at least) biblically, we must recognize that there is a necessary and reciprocal relation between Jesus and Spirit. Jesus is both the gift of the Spirit and the giver of the Spirit. While the Spirit has been active in all of creation, the narrative identification of the triune God presents the Spirit as the Spirit of the crucified and exalted Christ, and not simply as the Spirit of the Logos. The giving of the Spirit is an eschatological event, a deposit and foretaste of the new creation. Surely this is the significance of Pentecost and of sayings like John 8:39 (‘for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified’). It is the coming of Jesus that makes the gift of the Spirit universally accessible to all; and the work of the Spirit is to bear witness to the Logos made flesh, to convict the world of guilt, sin, righteousness and judgment, and to lead people to truth by ‘taking what is mine and making it known to you’ (Jn 15:26, 16:7ff).

## Responsible and Responsive Gospel Witness

By way of a personal conclusion, allow me to raise some questions with a view to deepening the integrity of our Christian missionary vocation today. These comments are necessarily (and perhaps unsatisfyingly) brief.

(1) Is not any ‘theology of religions’ inevitably reductionist? I have suggested that we should resist the recurring intellectual temptation to seek conceptual neatness and theoretical closure. Not only does this distort the complexities of religious traditions, which are intertwined with cultural and political factors in all historical situations, but there are good theological reasons for retaining ambiguity. Since the Spirit’s activity is universal, then why restrict it to the world religions? Moreover, God may graciously give saving faith to men and women while they live in the context of a non-Christian religion, and even be at work in the transformations of religious traditions to reflect his purposes for the world. But this is not the same as claiming that the religions themselves are vehicles of divine salvation and have been formed by God with that intent. If men and women encounter God in gracious friendship, might it be *despite* their religious practices and loyalties, and not *through* them?

As Chris Wright and John Goldingay have written:

‘The gospel is good news, not a good *idea*. It states that in the history of Israel and of Jesus, God has acted in love to restore humanity to God and to its destiny. On this understanding what is “deficient” about other religions is they cannot and do not focus on this story. ...We need redemption, not merely revelation... However much theological and spiritual insight other religions may have, then, by definition they cannot encompass the gospel, because they do not tell the gospel story. So, while one can honour them as starting points for people, one cannot in love view them as finishing points. There is no salvation in them, not because they are somehow inferior as religions to the religion of Christianity, but because they are not witnesses to the deeds of the God who saves.’<sup>55</sup>

(2) Does not gospel integrity demand that we hold together a high Christology and an open soteriology? The intent of God’s action in Jesus Christ is universal; but surely it is important to distinguish this universality of *intent* from a kind of universality that many religious pluralists seem to endorse, which is actually the *relinquishment* of its content. ‘To affirm the unique decisiveness of God’s action in Jesus Christ is not arrogance; it is the enduring bulwark against the arrogance of every culture to be itself the criterion by which others are judged.’<sup>56</sup> Moreover, as Donald Mackinnon has pointed out, ‘It is hard to see how anything which we can continue significantly to call Christianity can survive the withdrawal of the predicate *final* from the work of Christ.’<sup>57</sup>

The truth that the early Christians believed had been disclosed in Jesus was *for* the world because it was *about* the world and its future. This remains central and distinctive to the gospel. Thus, missionary outreach, both to Jews and to pagans, was not an activity tagged on later to a faith that was basically ‘about’ something else (e.g a superior metaphysical or ethical system); rather, it flowed from the very logic of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Therefore, in the words of David Bosch, ‘Christian faith cannot surrender the conviction that God, in sending Jesus Christ into our midst, has taken a definitive and eschatological course of action and is extending to human beings forgiveness, justification, and a new life of joy and servanthood, which, in turn, calls for a human response in the form of conversion.’<sup>58</sup>

However, the biblical witness to Jesus Christ as the world's indispensable Saviour requires that certain questions remain open in eschatological hope. Until that day when all hostile powers are subject to Christ and we share in the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor 15:24-28), we see 'in a mirror, dimly' (1 Cor 13:12). I am *simul justus et peccator*, in Luther's immortal words. I have been grasped by the truth as it is in Christ Jesus, yet am ever growing into the fullness of that truth. In this pilgrimage, even as I share the story of Jesus with others I find myself drawn deeper into the story and given fresh insights into it.

This is why the *other* is essential to our own pilgrimage. We do not know what we really believe, let alone how far our lives conform with what we profess to believe, until we engage in dialogue with others, especially those who are profoundly different from us. It is humility that enables me to see the ways in which I may be prone to use my 'Christianity' to conceal inconvenient truths about God and myself or to bolster my own ego in self-justification. Evangelism, if authentic, changes the bearers as well as the recipients of the gospel.

(3) Does it not follow that gospel integrity demands a dialogical approach to mission? Dialogue proceeds from the belief that, in the missionary encounter with other peoples and their cultures (whether explicitly religious or not), we are not moving into a void, but that we go expecting to meet the God who has preceded us and has been preparing people within the context of their own cultures and communities.

Christians need to engage seriously with the *contemporary* art forms which embody the beliefs and values of our non-Christian neighbours. Sadly, the great bulk of writings on inter-religious dialogue that come from academic theologians, whether in the West or Asia, tend to be discussions of ancient Indian, Arabic or Chinese texts. There is comparatively little engagement with the novels, films, paintings and street dramas that represent the way that modern Muslims, Buddhists and others have re-interpreted their religious heritage in the light of both external critique and internal pressure. If we are relating the gospel to real people and their living traditions, then such critical attention is surely necessary.

Listening will lead, at times, to new appreciation; at other times, profound disagreement and vigorous debate. Sometimes the differences we discover through dialogue may be less important than we thought, at other times the similarities we assumed to exist turn out on closer inspection to be very superficial. Moreover, for the Christian, dialogue is always in the service of *witness*. In seeking to persuade others, but not in a manipulative or coercive manner, that the vision of the world that opens up through the gospel story is more true and more desirable than any alternative, we take the 'otherness' of the other seriously. Such persuasion, needless to say, will only be credible if the Church indwells that story and incarnates it in her life in the world.

In my experience, it is Christians who tend to take the initiative in dialogue with the leaders of other faiths, and precisely out of a missionary impulse. Often our dialogue partners are those who have been exposed to Christian or secular influences in their educational formation. Christians living in hostile environments as beleaguered minorities tend to view Western talk of dialogue with cynicism. The challenge as they see it is for the Other to understand and accept *our* otherness. All phobias are the result of ignorance and the inability to look critically at oneself and one's own community. Good relations can only be established between Christians and Muslims in the West if Christians were forthright in exposing and condemning all expressions of anti-Muslim bigotry in the West, and if Muslim leaders were

to, with equal fervour, condemn similar bigotry and discrimination by their own ranks both in the West and in what they regard as the *dar-ul-Islam*. Across Europe it seems that a new generation of Muslims is becoming active in democratic politics. In this media-dominated age, may the nature of Muslim-Christian relations in cities like Birmingham or Marseilles be crucial for Muslim-Christian relations elsewhere in the world?

I have been arguing for what might be called an orthodox, postmodern Christian faith that holds that it is in the incarnate life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that the divine character is decisively and supremely disclosed and the divine saving purpose effected; but not in a way that gives us finite and sinful human beings a unifying *theoretical* scheme that embraces the whole history and diversity of human experience. Rather, it is given in such a way that it becomes the *universal point of reference* for distinguishing between true and false visions of human flourishing. Otherwise, how do we distinguish the divine Spirit from the demonic? But reading the signs of how God is at work in the secular and religious activities of humanity, is always hazardous and must be done with appropriate humility. It is the Spirit who makes a genuine ‘hermeneutical spiral’ possible, helping us to be critical of the church’s language and practice and not identifying the absoluteness of Christ with the pilgrim church and Christianity.

‘The biblical story’, as Richard Bauckham reminds us, ‘is not only critical of other stories but also hospitable to other stories. On its way to the kingdom of God it does not abolish all other stories, but brings them all into relationship to itself and its way to the kingdom. It becomes the story of all stories, taking with it into the kingdom all that can be positively related to the God of Israel and Jesus. The presence of so many little stories within the biblical metanarrative, so many fragments and glimpses of other stories, within Scripture itself, is surely a sign and an earnest of that. The universal that is the kingdom of God is no dreary uniformity or oppressive denial of difference, but the milieu in which every particular reaches its true destiny in relation to the God who is the God of all because he is the God of Jesus.’<sup>59</sup>

I cannot think of a more fitting way of ending this review than with the closing words of the Commission IV Report, still as fresh and stirring as when uttered almost a century ago: ‘But at least as remarkable as that spectacle of the outward advance of the Church is that which has also been revealed to us of the inward transformations that are in process in the mind of the missionary, the changes of perspective, the softening of wrong antagonisms, the centralising and deepening of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the growth of the spirit of love to the brethren and to the world. Once again the Church is facing its duty, and therefore once more the ancient guiding fires begin to burn and shine.’<sup>60</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Temple Gairdner, *Edinburgh 1910: An Account and Interpretation of the World Missionary Conference* (Edinburgh, 1910) pp.134

<sup>2</sup> Report of Commission IV: The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions, World Missionary Conference 1910 (London and Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, New York and Toronto: Fleming H. Revell & Co. 1910) pp.217-8

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* .p.235

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* pp.216-7

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*p.226

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p.231

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*p.232

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*p.273

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*pp.273-4

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*p.220

<sup>11</sup> Gairdner, *op.cit.*, pp.128-9

<sup>12</sup> *Report, op.cit.*, p.241

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*p.243

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*p.228

<sup>15</sup> Gairdner, *op.cit.*, p.146

<sup>16</sup> *Report, op.cit.*, p.268

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*p.234

<sup>18</sup> Gairdner, *op.cit.*, p.138

<sup>19</sup> *Report, op.cit.*, p.246

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*p.245

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* pp.276-8

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p.276

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p.279

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Gairdner, *op.cit.*, p.150

<sup>25</sup> John Mbiti, quoted in Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa; The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995) p.217

<sup>26</sup> For Farquhar, see Eric J. Sharpe, *Not to Destroy but to Fulfil: The Contribution of J.N. Farquhar to Protestant Missionary Thought in India before 1914* (Uppsala: Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, 1965)

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in *Report, op.cit.*, p.185

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<sup>28</sup> Peter Cotterell, *Mission and Meaninglessness: The Good News in a World of Suffering and Disorder* (London: SPCK, 1990) p.51

<sup>29</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (London: SPCK, 1978) p.200

<sup>30</sup> M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, 2nd ed. (Madras: CLS, 1976)

<sup>31</sup> M.M. Thomas, 'The Absoluteness of Jesus Christ and Christ-Centred Syncretism', *Ecumenical Review* 37, October 1985

<sup>32</sup> *The Acknowledged Christ*, op.cit., pp.81-2

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Christopher Lamb, *The Call to Retrieval: Kenneth Cragg's Christian Vocation to Islam* (London: Grey Seal, 1997) Ch.5

<sup>34</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *The Christ and the Faiths* (London: SPCK, 1986) p.17

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (1956, 2nd edition, London: Collins, 1985) p.308

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*p.168

<sup>38</sup> *The Christ and the Faiths*, op.cit., p.5

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*p.323

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*p.322

<sup>41</sup> Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999) p.21

<sup>42</sup> Karl Rahner, 'Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions', *Theological Investigations*, vol.5 (London: Darton, Longmand and Todd, 1966) p.121

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*p.128

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*pp.121-2,125,130

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*p.121

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*p.131

<sup>47</sup> Samuel Rayan, *Breath of Fire- The Holy Spirit: Heart of the Christian Gospel* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979) p.2

<sup>48</sup> Samuel Rayan, 'Religions, Salvation, Mission' in Paul Mojzes and Leonard Swidler (eds.), *Christian Mission and Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Lewiston, USA and Lampeter, UK: Edwin Mellor Press, 1990) pp.138,139

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<sup>49</sup> John Hick and Paul Knitter (eds), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (London: SCM, 1987) p vii

<sup>50</sup> Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Towards the World Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1985) pp.220-22

<sup>51</sup> Hans Küng, 'Christianity and World Religions: Dialogue with Islam' in Leonard Swidler, ed., *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1987) p.236

<sup>52</sup> Cf. R. Panikkar, 'The Jordan, the Tiber and the Ganges: Three Kairological Moments of Christic Self-Awareness' in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, ed. J. Hick & P. Knitter (London: SCM, 1988)

<sup>53</sup> Robert Gimello, 'Mysticisms and Meditation' in Steven Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) p.193

<sup>54</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'Does the Trinity Belong in a Theology of Religions? On Angling in the Rubicon and the "Identity" of God', in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.) *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1997) p.52

<sup>55</sup> John E. Goldingay and Christopher J.H. Wright, '“Yahweh our God Yahweh One”: The Old Testament and Religious Pluralism', in *One God, One Lord in a World of Religious Pluralism*, eds. A.D. Clark and B.W. Winter (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1991) pp.44,45

<sup>56</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Eerdmans, 1989) p.166

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996) p.262

<sup>58</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission; Paradigm shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991) p.488

<sup>59</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* ( Grand Rapids, Mi: Baker Academic, 2003) p.110

<sup>60</sup> *Report, op.cit.*, pp.273-4