

THE STRANGER WITHIN OUR GATES: INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND THE NORMATIVENESS OF JESUS

Concern about the other is a subject for thought at least as old as humankind. Today the concern of Christians about the faiths of others has entered a new phase. Global economic and political interdependence, rapid transportation, and the expanding communications super-highway have given rise to a situation in which different cultures and their religious traditions are encountering each other as never before. In addition, an influx of immigrants from East to West, fueled by poverty and ethnic, political and religious turmoil is contributing to the growth of multicultural and multireligious societies that present possibilities for conflict or enrichment. While these technological and demographic changes and the challenges they place before Western societies are largely twentieth century phenomena, the

intellectual challenge to Western Christianity has an earlier provenance in the Enlightenment and in the fact that from the seventeenth century on, the East has been seeping into Western consciousness.¹

Until relatively recently, diverse faiths existed almost in isolation from one another. When cultures did meet, the encounters were often marked by bloodshed and cultural vandalism because one would not acknowledge the moral standing of the other.² Only with expanding colonialism, interlacing international networks, innovations in communications, and snowballing economic and ecological interdependence did the fact of plurality erupt into serious questions. The stranger stood within the gates of Western consciousness; he was our neighbor. The Western ego was decentered; so, too, its Eurocentric history. As long as it was assumed that Western values and beliefs had scaled the apex of human evolution, other cultures and belief systems presented no challenge. But no more. The diverse family of faiths our planet is home to raises questions about their coexistence that demand address.

All this has moved the West to recontextualize itself in a larger world. Although Christianity even in its beginnings was already seriously addressing non-Christian religions (e.g., Justin, Origen), in the closing third of the twentieth century it entered into dialogue with the religions in a way unknown before. Christianity can no longer read its tradition apart from the other great traditions. The encounter is somewhat similar to that of the fledgling Christian community facing the Greco-Roman world in its dawning centuries. Now, as then, Christianity confronts a new frontier. Encountering the stranger at close quarters necessitates a shift in horizon, no easy challenge when commensurate precedents are lacking.³ Modern religious pluralism has plunged Christianity into a new conceptual crisis, one every bit as formidable as the crisis it faces in the large, public phenomenon of unbelief that was unleashed with modernity.⁴ In this liminal state Christianity is forced to probe its identity, to take again its bearing. Christendom and Western empire building are long dead. Christianity, no longer gripping Western imagination, no longer drives the intellectual, spiritual, and cultural climate. Until it entered the modern era, Christianity

never had to deal systematically and from a position of equality with the other great traditions.⁵ Christians seeking dialogue with the non-Christian faiths can ill afford postures of superiority or supersessionism, nor dreams of missionary conquest. There is no need to see in all this a turn for the worse. The liminal state that crisis throws us into can prove a fertile seed bed.

Christianity is not, however, pushed into encounter with the other religions merely by reason of its new situation in a global city that is secularized and culturally polycentric. It is impelled to dialogue by the logic of its own deepest conviction. Christianity's central affirmation, that divine Wisdom is incarnate in Jesus, ought not be construed to mean that Jesus is the sole medium in which God's creative and reconciling agency may be present in the world. No understanding of the religions is acceptable that denies the love of God for all of creation or holds hostage in one small corner of the world the power of God to overcome the alienation of humanity from its ground. The Word incarnate in Jesus is the discourse that enlightens everyone; the Wisdom met in Jesus is the Wisdom already , always, and everywhere at work. The Christocentrism of sectarian

isolationism is misguided because it misunderstands the incarnation and makes its god a tribal deity. To place Jesus at the center of history, as Christians do, is not to make him the whole human story. Too often the problem with the way Christians tell their story is not that Jesus is at the center, but that the circumference is far too constricted. As Rahner has pointed out, comfortably ensconced for too long, Constantinian Christianity came to view itself as Western and European with annexes in North and South America. Now comes the challenging opportunity to truly be, for the first time, a world community, which will entail reassessing what Christians mean by “we”.⁶ This is not to remove Jesus from the center, but to transform all that revolves around that center. Precisely because Wisdom incarnate is its center, Christianity is thrust outward toward a more inclusive history. While there must be boundaries, and doctrines do, among other things, draw boundaries, we are often too quick to draw them, failing to see the wisdom on both sides of the lines. Can we ignore what we take to be wisdom, divine wisdom, in the other ? Can we afford the idolatry that makes our small understanding the whole of the story?

SITUATING THE OTHER

In the waning decades of this century, theologians concerned with the relationship of Christianity to the world religions adopted a paradigm that maps out a typology of three possible ways of conceiving the relationship. The categories employed are exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, and the compass points are soteriology and christology. Who gets saved? How? And by whom? The paradigm runs, crudely, as follows. Exclusivism affirms that truth is found in only one religion, Christianity, for salvation and revelation are found only in Jesus; the Christ event is constitutive of any authentic encounter with God, always and everywhere.⁷ Thus other traditions are marginalized as flawed human attempts at self-salvation, deformed by error and vice. Because exclusivism is preoccupied with guarding and maintaining its own house, the center of the universe, it shrinks the hermeneutical circle. Dialogue, therefore, if not ignored, is for proselytizing. Inclusivism, officially espoused by Roman Catholicism at Vatican II, expands the hermeneutical circle. Venturing beyond its borders, it maintains that the saving self-revealing God of Christians, “who desires

everyone to be saved and come to knowledge of the truth” (Tim 2:4), is present and at work in and through the world’s religions.⁸ However, whatever truth and saving power are found in other faiths is already included in Christianity and found there more fully, more certainly. The aims, doctrines, and forms of life of other religions may have significant material commonality with those of Christianity, but where so, they are superseded or fulfilled by Christianity, basically because the Christ encompasses the others by being present in them anonymously or by fulfilling them. In a sense, the others are implicit forms of Christianity. Jesus remains, if not constitutive of, at least normative for, all religious experience.⁹

As for pluralism, it contends that many, or even in extreme versions, all religions are formally true and equivalent. Jesus is unique, but so are all great religious figures. Moreover, Jesus is neither constitutive of nor normative for authentic religious experience. Initially, pluralists opposed theocentrism to christocentrism. In other words, Jesus is but one manifestation, one incarnation of God’s revelation and salvation in history.¹⁰ Jesus, therefore, may have universal

relevance, but he is not the absolute savior, definitive and unsurpassable. A fourth possibility, though generally not included in the paradigm, is sheer conceptual relativism. It maintains that there are no universal norms.

Lacking a normative critique of norms, which would make comparisons possible, each tradition is best by its own norms. The incommensurability of ultimate systems is unbridgeable. Each discursive universe, limited by its own horizon, is hermeneutically sealed, inaccessible to outsiders and relevant to itself alone. Radical relativism does not deny that beliefs and practices can be validated, but their validity and the process of validation itself are relative to the culture they inhabit. One cannot assess the truth of other religions from outside their circle. Things stand with the stranger as they did with Wittgenstein's lion: "If he could talk, we could not understand him".¹¹ While appearing to do equal justice to all, relativism in fact cancels the claims of all, since all claim universality. Implied is refusal to acknowledge the other as one who can challenge one's own positions. The communicative purpose of language is thus privatized, immunized to critique, hence undermined.

Finally, it is worth noting three things about this paradigm. First, the three approaches boldly state their position in the indicative mood, as factual: Christianity is the only true religion; whatever truth is found in other faiths is already included, preeminently, in Christianity; all faiths are true and roughly equivalent. A more simplistic labeling of the three reduces them to ecclesiocentrism, christocentrism, and theocentrism, respectively. Second, as is the case with many Christians, exclusivist and inclusivist positions are often espoused by non-Christian believers as well, who place their own tradition at the center, outsiders on the periphery.¹² Third, all members of the paradigm draw cross-cultural judgments about other traditions. At issue is not the fact that such judgments are made, but whether compelling arguments can be marshaled for them, so that they are more than simply reflections of one's own cultural and religious commitments.

A CRITIQUE OF THE PARADIGM IN VOGUE

Such *a priori* paradigm building is, at least, premature, if, indeed, even possible. The relationship of Christianity to the other religions requires recasting in a way that while exploiting resources available in the Christian

tradition, also respects the complex particularities of other traditions and studies them for their own sake. In other words, one needs to attend to both the *a priori* and the *a posteriori* aspects of theology of the religions if it is to be a viable theology. The *a priori* aspect derives from what can be said about religious pluralism by appealing solely to the faith commitments and theological axioms of the Christian community. While diverse strands of the tradition may produce diverse *a priori* theologies of the religions, all *a priori* approaches are formally alike in that they derive from no knowledge of other religious communities aside from the bare fact of their existence. Obviously, *a priori* theory building, necessary as it is, cannot by itself constitute a full-blown theology of the religions. At best, it lays bare Christian presuppositions, maps out Christian doctrines concerning other religions, sketches a methodology, and thus delineates constraining parameter for dialogue and study.¹³ Hermeneutical honesty demands as much. The exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist positions are the result of such *a priori* theologizing.

The constructive *a posteriori* dimension of a theology of the religions, on the other hand, demands a knowledge of other traditions. It follows and derives from a critical understanding of other belief systems that has been integrated into the diverse areas of Christian theology. Because until recently few theologians have been concerned with comparative study, little *a posteriori* understanding born of comparative analysis has been incorporated into Christian theology. Theologies of the religions remain, for the most part, *a priori*. This essay is itself just such an *a priori* theologizing. And while *a priori* theologizing is necessary, the danger is that it begets a complacency that one's work is finished. This illusion blunts any sense of need for detailed study of the aims and forms of life pursued by non-Christians. Certainly, lack of concern for specifics is not ingredient to an *a priori* theology of religions, but it is fairly common. The thinking seems to be that obstacles impeding understanding of the relationships between traditions can be eliminated if only we get our doctrines about the others right.

Yet we have to distrust any theology of the religions that promises too much, too quickly, too cheaply. What is to be feared is neither the prospect of disagreement nor the weariness of a long impasse, but an undisciplined rush to simplistic positions whose easy certitudes allay our anxiety. Anxiety, however, is the specter that will continue to dog the faith of Christians in a post-Christian world. In encounter with the non-Christian world Christians will rediscover themselves as a community and where they stand in relation to the God of Jesus Christ. Christians can make clear the sincerity with which they enter conversation with other faiths only by placing beyond doubt their preparedness to face others' claims and to let the others test their very identity by putting at risk their present Christian self-understanding. This does not mean that Christians enter dialogue empty-headed, stripped of their commitments. Still, any half-serious Christian will find that serious engagement with non-Christian life worlds may entail significant, soul-searching, an unnerving test of one's intellectual, moral, and religious mettle. Faced with a plurality of faiths, what am I to think about my tradition, about myself in relation to the others? In what follows, even if I

fail to construe or analyze correctly the tangled web of issues that must concern any theology of religions, I hope at least to identify those issues and to make some generalizable points.

I turn first to a more specific critique of the paradigm in vogue. In a state of post-conciliar euphoria many theologians gladly embraced inclusivism, often as it was elaborated by Karl Rahner. Some went beyond Vatican II and Rahner to endorse the pluralism of a thinker like John Hick. There was comfort in both. These positions fostered openness, respect, the commonality of our humanity. They also provided an explanatory power as reassuring as it was beguiling. And they seemed blessed by a congruity with Christian teaching concerning God's universal salvific will that rendered them coherent with a magnanimity in the Catholic tradition tracing at least as far back as Justin the Apologist. Besides, who is those bracing post-conciliar days of theological renaissance would have wanted to be a benighted Feeneyite exclusivist dispatching "non-Catholics" to hell,¹⁴ or even a benign exclusivist, who by seeming theological sleights of hand made it possible for God to snatch unbelievers from the jaws of perdition?¹⁵

Nonetheless, the lack of sympathy that the so-called exclusivist position meets with today appears unduly one-sided. What we label “exclusivism” and equate with imperialist adventures and colonialist abuse was, in its origins, not an expression of arrogance but of the absoluteness of religious commitment, of ultimate concern, an expression of heartfelt loyalty to meanings and values a community judged true and to the conviction that salvation is by the grace of God in Christ, not by any human achievement. Sensitivity to others’ commitments was not always lacking in exclusivists, though there was deep conviction that one’s own religious vision was definitive, warranted by experience and reason in a way that other visions of reality were not. We solidify our own group by distinguishing it from groups that are other, even alien. Identities, national or religious, cannot help but be shaped negatively as well as positively, for confessional claims grow into consciousness of their uniqueness by contrast with the claims of others. Thus all the great traditions make particularistic claims to universality; paradoxically, believers give themselves absolutely to an absolute they can grasp only relatively, for the absolute meets us and grasps us only in the

relative, the particular. It seems there must be something like this absolutist sentiment in the heart of every serious believer, though to label it “exclusivism” in every case seems misleading. However, Kantian limitations on reason and modern relativism weakened confidence in reason where religion is concerned. This, along with the modern pluralistic and secular nation-state, which privatizes and trivializes religious commitment, has sapped the strength of religious commitment for many.¹⁶ So much so, that serious religious conviction often meets a wall of incomprehension, even denunciation in secularized Western consciousness, especially when those convictions are voiced in “the naked public square” in an attempt to shape public policy.

As for inclusivism and pluralism, they rest upon the unwarranted *a priori* assumption that religions with aims, doctrines, and patterns of life that do not appear readily reconcilable are, nonetheless, in their deepest reality “about the same thing.” Their diverse finalities and soteriologies, it is assumed, ultimately converge. More precisely, the same set of beliefs and norms, or an identical referent (reality with a capital R, or Ultimacy, or the

Sacred, etc.) for beliefs and norms not shared, are assumed to be characteristic of all religions. This may be the case in some or in many instances. But we cannot assume it to be so. Are they all “about the same thing?” Can we even say that all religions have a soteriology? That diverse doctrines are identical, or similar, or complementary, or contrary, or dialectically related or have the same referent, these are judgments to be arrived at only after long, patient study and dialogue. Long and patient, because given the indeterminacy of meaning and the limits of understanding, dialogue is never easy. Profound commonalities are not presuppositions of dialogue; they are, perhaps, its conclusion. As it stands, inclusivists and pluralists presuppose commonality and elide the particularities of diverse traditions with an assertion proper to some pallid theory of religion, the vagueness and banality of which captures the commitments of no actual religious community. Meanings buried deep in culturally conditioned religious symbols, moreover, cannot effortlessly and objectively be sniffed out in their pure state much as muzzled truffle hunters might efficiently and

harmlessly scent out the precious quarry of their search.¹⁷ Difficult spade work is required, long and patient study.

Hans Küng has said (in a half truth), “There can be no world peace without religious peace”.¹⁸ We can add that religious peace comes largely with understanding. But to understand is to interpret and interpretation demands conversation and textual study. Yet it is the urgency of conversation and the rigors of interpretation that the logic of exclusivism, inclusivism, and especially pluralism undercut. More is needed than romantic celebration of multiculturalism. And that is painstaking comparative analysis of the aims and practices of particular traditions, dialogue that uncovers the life-possibilities the other may yield. Failing that, we are left with ungrounded assumptions about an identical abstract “Other” experienced by all in ineffable personal encounter. Here is an effective strategy to dampen the need for the textual analysis and critical comparative work that would in turn entail the rereading of one’s own texts with new eyes. The major religious families tagged Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam are ahistorical reifications abstracted from the living flow

of ordinary persons, prophets, mystics and their practices and symbols. Shorthand descriptions are blind to the many different ways of being Jew, Muslim, or Buddhist. Pluralists and inclusivists compound the reification by submitting the flow to a further level of abstraction, running it again through their homogenizing grids that filter out dense particularities and intractable specificities and categorize them as merely mythological or culture-specific. All phenomenal differences, even when acknowledged, are evaded by preoccupation with a noumenal Real assumed common to all, the Mystery beyond all grasping.

One need not be much concerned about detailed analyses of the doctrines and practices of others if they are discounted as merely culturally generated expressions of a deeper, more important reality universally shared by all religions that renders them alike, even equivalent. Interest in the other may wane when one already knows what one will find in a study of the other's beliefs and practices. There is something very wrong about a theory that pronounces judgments on other faiths, yet whose logic absolves us from serious study of the other. In this regard, theology, like politics makes

strange bedfellows. Even Karl Barth in his radical exclusivism, like inclusivists and pluralists, knew prior to detailed study what he would find in the religions: *Unglaube*, human attempts at self-justification, idols that cannot save.

Prolonging the Enlightenment dream, inclusivism and pluralism are propelled by a foundationalist mode of thought so focused on elements presumed universally shared by all that they are insufficiently attentive to the stubborn, messy particulars of the goals, doctrines, and life patterns that color the religious landscape. The Enlightenment project sought to eradicate the supposed prejudices of “local” reasonings and to set reason on a secure, universal foundation. Yet it is precisely these full-blooded realities of “local” reasonings, now leveled out by inclusivists and pluralists, that fire hearts and imaginations and energize the wills of believers. The formalities shared by the great traditions that pluralists make so much of may be difficult to disagree with, but equally difficult to get excited about or build one’s life upon. No one dies for a generic religion.

Inclusivists and pluralists envision a new kind of subject, one that is placeless, universal, global. At work in their thinking is the assumption that they have achieved an Archimedean point, a neutral, objective vantage point, a “view from nowhere”, outside all religious, philosophical, and cultural traditions. From this pure space far from the noise of culture, they survey the sweep of history and detect in all the great religions a common denominator, a shared inmost core, a forever elusive noumenon that is present but absent in some transcendental experience or in some never finished struggle for liberation. Around this noumenal center swirl a galaxy of less important phenomena (doctrines, rituals, myths, forms of life), all born of the faith of believers fated to be forever “almosting it.” Pluralist maneuvers converge in considering all religions partial instantiations of an elusive truth, a universal religiosity. Thus all “positive religions” are relativized as sub-species. Given such a globe-straddling standpoint, one can, in one sense, better comprehend the great religions than their own faithful might.

There is in all this a large irony. In a repentant post-colonial era, pluralist theory is willy-nilly implicated in a subtle intellectual

supersessionism, a neo-colonialist form of discourse that constructs its other.

Others are stripped of the radical historical particularity that constitutes them as other and domesticated, assimilated to one's own projects and assessed, even invented accordingly.¹⁹ The other as genuinely other is disdained.

There is even a kind of colonial justice at work here. Pluralists have peace of mind knowing they are open and accepting of all as equals, while at the same time they nudge into oblivion the justice they fail to do to the concrete beliefs and practices of Christians and non-Christians as all differences are counted as epiphenomenal. Inclusivists and pluralists may be open to Buddhists in a way that exclusivists were not. But they may hear them in the calm confidence that in final analysis what these others have to say is not all that important, because it is not really different from what believers everywhere say. Pluralism especially is insistent on the rough parity of the diverse discursive spaces occupied by different traditions. All faiths voice the same enlightenment or pursue the same goal of liberation. Thus pluralism melts into a monism that brackets, reinterprets, or relativizes particular truth claims in deference to an alleged anthropological constant.

The other is respected simply as image of oneself. Sympathy masks subtle betrayal. The others are reduced to being utterly transparent; we preempt their voice and presume to speak for them. Perhaps yesterday's missionaries were more accurate observers of the other religions than today's questers after Eastern wisdom. For even in their hostility or superiority they registered differences that go unseen by the glossing eye of the open-minded, tolerant pluralist.

If, however, doctrines as speech acts are, among other things, declarative and cognitive, if religious discourse must be given realist construal, and if humans are inescapably immersed in their communal history and stand always contextualized within a tradition and culture tied to particular systems of meaning, then wholesale degutting of diversities in the interest of some imposed idealization, a contentless universalism, will not do.²⁰ Is the Theravadin seeking Nirvana really seeking beatific vision of the triune God? Are Eckhart and Nagarjuna experiencing the same reality? Is the Zen master's satori what Christians mean by salvation? Is the Vaishnavite's devotion to Krishna really love of Jesus? Is Mahayana

Buddhism's sunyata simply what Christians name God? Are the complex anthropologies of Buddhism and Christianity ultimately equivalent? The tendency of inclusivism and pluralism is to underplay *prima facie* differences as salvifically irrelevant, to mute the possibility that there are deeply ingrained, cognitively significant incompatibilities among the doctrines and practices that communities consider salvifically crucial. Profound similarities that are similarities-in-difference, analogies, there may be. But pluralism and inclusivism tend to paper over differences as due to a misapprehension of their own tradition by believers. This, of course, evidences pluralism's ambivalence about language and texts, both of which appear purely instrumental, secondary, and divisive in the world of experience as pluralism conceives it.

Finally, it would seem that mutual understanding is arrived at not by an immediate *a priori* adoption of a higher viewpoint, but by first adopting a lower viewpoint. What makes mutual interpretation possible is the natural hermeneutical competence that brings together strangers at sixes and sevens about one another, the intuition and wager that they are in their differences,

their otherness, mutually interpretable. All seek to understand; even more, to be understood. All are relatively intelligent and intelligible. A theology of the religions cannot start with a hermeneutics of suspicion. Rather, starting from below with distinctive differences, it proceeds in modesty and restraint. A theology of religions, confident of the ubiquity of grace, will affirm the possibility that God is at work in the lives of non-Christians. However, providing a detailed account of how this may be risks underestimating the distinctiveness of the religious aims they so fervently pursue. We can agree with pluralists that we need to probe beneath what is said to something deeper. But the deeper something may not prove to be a common essence, but diversity. Nonetheless, the wager is that apparent contradictories can also often be resolved into non-contradictory differences, that what is intended by those who have lived, felt, and reflected deeply is apt to be true; their formulations, however, may exclude other truths that ought not be excluded.²¹

All this leads us to again avert briefly to a matter crucial to the question at hand. In reflecting on these issues one keeps hearing other voices

that in some subterranean passage are engaged in debate, a debate between foundationalists and nonfoundationalists.²² Foundationalists stress universally shared foundational elements readily discernible to any reasonable person; nonfoundationalists, cultural diversity and unrepentant particularities that, despite family resemblances, resist philosophical or theological reduction to a common denominator or ready translation that warrants a facile explanation of the relationship among cultures and value systems. Foundationalists seek explanation of diversities by weaving them into a grand texture; nonfoundationalists, by positioning them within concrete cultural-linguistic frames of reference that build different worlds. The drift of the nonfoundationalist turn is to exchange a set of well-charted problems for a set of uncharted ones. These voices are a pertinent sub-text for a theology of the religions. Our theological problem is partially in function of this basic philosophical problem.

A PROPOSAL

Given this critique of the theology of religions as it stands, how are we to proceed? First, following the lead of Shubert Ogden and Paul Griffiths, but enlarging upon it, it seems preferable to modalize the three positions in the paradigm, to recast them in terms of possibility, to throw them into the subjunctive mood.²³ Transposed into a new key, the three play as follows. Exclusivism: it is possible that Christianity is the only true and salvific religion. Inclusivism: it is possible that whatever salvific truth might be found in other faiths is already included preeminently in Christianity. Pluralism: it is possible that many or all religions are true and salvific. Modalization makes for a more nuanced *a priori* theology of religions and opens the door more widely (and more logically) to an *a posteriori* theology of religion that feeds off comparative analysis.

Second, constructing a theology of the religions that does justice to both the *a priori* and *a posteriori* phases means that theologians have to work within a set of constraints levied by the faith commitments of their community and the discipline of theology. But no less has to be said of any believer encountering faiths other than his or her own. These constraints are

parameters of the theological enterprise and meant to insure fidelity to the tradition they express and derive from; they are directives as to what positions are choice-worthy. They are not meant to impede creativity, but are conditions of the possibility of dialogue.

The *a priori* stage of a theology of religions would lay down, e.g., the following constraining parameters (the listing is not taxative). First, and most basic, the incarnate presence of God in Jesus Christ heightens the human solidarity rooted in the creation of all in the image of God. All human conversation involves God's incarnate presence. Traces of God incarnate mark the countenance of the stranger, the uncomprehended other. And eucharistic living in the dialogue of life provides hospitality to the other, especially the stranger and the outcast. Genuine conversation, therefore, requires non-exclusive concern for the flourishing of the other. A Christian is constrained, secondly, by the conviction that salvation is attainable through the grace of Christ. Many add "always and only;" some do not. A third major constraint upon a theology of religions is that it must seriously address the commitments, beliefs, and practices of the non-Christian

religions in all their rich particularity. Christians cannot gratuitously assume that other communities offer their members exactly what Christianity offers its member in a different guise. Hasty assimilation of non-Christian doctrinal and practical commitments to those of Christians must be resisted. This third constraint rests upon a fourth, viz., that because God's love is unbounded, we expect that love to be active in other communities, thus non-Christian traditions may be playing out a role in the divine plan, though the role is not clearly discernible while details of the divine plot are veiled to us. God's salvific will, Christians believe, ranges universally and the Word incarnate in Jesus is the Wisdom, "the true light which enlightens everyone" (John 1:9). A fifth constraint, as many construe Christian self-understanding, would perhaps be this: even if the aims and forms of life of any non-Christian communities share significant material commonality with those of Christianity, Christianity supersedes and fulfills them. This constraint derives from the belief that salvation is always *solo Christo*. Of course, it is possible there may be religious communities whose aims share no significant commonality with Christianity. In that case Christians might

attempt to discern what wisdom they might offer and their role, if any, in the divine economy, recognizing that eschatologically God may bring members of such communities and Christians to a convergence. Possibly, such communities can bring their members to the goals they pursue, goals that may not be in contradiction to those pursued by Christians, but which ought not be assumed latently or imperfectly Christian.

Given these constraints a theology of religions cannot commit itself to an easy *a priori* inclusivism or pluralism that assimilates the others and makes them crypto-Christians or reduces all to a generic religion, in which no real, living community might recognize itself. Both moves turn a deaf ear to claims by the other and assume that other traditions are not really talking about what they take themselves to be talking about, nor valuing what they take it they are valuing. Such a posture is not conducive to substantive concern about the beliefs and practices of others. Transposing the members of the current paradigm into the mode of possibility is so conducive. Indeed, it demands critical study of non-Christian communities. There is no way to know in advance whether or not there is significant material commonality

among the religions. Moreover, such study and dialogue open the way to diverse possibilities. First, it might be that the aims and practices of other traditions are diametrically opposed to Christian aims. The appropriate Christian response then might be civil criticism or an apologetic.. Second, it might be that the aims and forms of life of other traditions are not opposed to those of Christianity but are simply different. Christians may in this case have something to learn and should be ready to recognize in the other a truth not taught in their own community. Disparate histories may play against each other to produce not harmony but polyphony. Vatican II allows acknowledgment of truths unearthed in non-Christian communities only when they are already taught by the church. Surely we need to go beyond that and gratefully acknowledge truth's manifestation wherever it occurs.²⁴ Perhaps the church will come to teach the truth contained in the others' doctrines because they are of value in grasping and living the gospel. True conversation lays open the possibility of deepening one's conviction but also of revising, qualifying, or abandoning strongly held convictions. Only if we are disposed to change do other religions cease being merely objects of

proselytization and become partners in a common quest for truth. Thirdly, the doctrines and practices of other traditions might be neither opposed to nor different from those of Christianity, but substantively identical.²⁵ This possibility will be vehemently rejected by some because of their version of the second *a priori* constraint, the faith stance that salvation is always and only through the grace of Christ and that Christianity is the sole community which professes this. Hence the Christian community is the unsurpassable vehicle of salvation and no other shares precisely its aims. Of course, theologians who claim as much have proven endlessly generous and fertile in finding imaginative ways of rescuing those lost in a sea of confusion, sweeping them into Peter's bark and bringing them to safe harbor.²⁶

Nonetheless, to take the aims of others seriously and precisely as *religious* aims, whether consonant with Christian aims or not, is to recognize that all faiths entail commitments that claim universal relevance and esteem their aims as salvific and generally, unsurpassable. Religious commitment is driven to suffuse every dimension of life, to penetrate every corner and crevice; it is one's most intensive and comprehensive way of

valuing, the all-encompassing horizon.²⁷ But more. Believers find it unthinkable that their aims might be embraced within, subsumed and superseded by any other community's aim, or shown to be penultimate, merely preparatory to higher aims and forms of life. An irenic and tolerant inclusivism can thus become intolerable, misguided in the eyes of serious believers of other communities. In one sense, inclusivistic supersession may even imply that other believers are mistaken, that their superseded aims are not strictly *religious* aims, lacking as they do comprehensiveness and unsurpassability. In this sense, amid the varieties of aims only one set of truly *religious* aims can emerge, for only one set can be unsurpassable and wholly comprehensive.

Inclusivism now appears to bleed into exclusivism. Both are instances of a salvational monism, the view that there is, in the end, only one, definitively salvific religion, indeed, strictly speaking, only one religion. For both exclusivism and inclusivism, the Christ event uniquely constitutes the possibility of salvation and is the formal norm judging the truth of any tradition claiming to be a religion. They differ only in how this formal norm,

the Christ event, is accessible to people.²⁸ Perhaps, too, both exclusivism and inclusivism risk offending against Christian self-understanding, which views Christians and all others as alike the object of God's all-embracing love, by allowing that some have privileged access to God's love solely for contingent reasons, such as the accidents of birth. Ironically, this makes darker still the mystery of evil.²⁹ At any rate, both claim that all meaning, every assertion about the significance of life and reality is to be judged by reference to a fleeting set of contingent happenings in the life of a "marginal Jew" in first century Palestine. This is a faith claim.

Herein arises the problem of Jesus' uniqueness and universal, definitive normativeness as Christ.³⁰ Obviously, one must not identify Jesus, the Christ, and Christianity. The faith claim that Jesus is absolute, normative savior does not entail the empirical claim that Christianity as an ambivalent historical religion shares the same absoluteness, normativeness, and unsurpassability (pace Hegel).³¹ Head and body, vine and branches, shepherd and sheepfold know a unity, but remain distinct. This is why Christians must be critical of their community as *semper reformanda*.³²

Precisely confusion of the two claims, not the logic of the first claim led to the religious imperialism and exploitation that pluralists rightly bewail but illogically point to as ground for total abandonment of the first claim. To draw this distinction is not to erase the ambiguity of Christianity's history or absolve Christians of the horrors of their misdeeds. It is naive to think, however, that if all religious claims to superiority and uniqueness were surrendered, evils too often associated with such claims would be drastically reduced.³³ We all need to say of ourselves as Prospero did of Caliban: "This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine".

But what are we to make of the claim that Jesus is the absolute savior? Perhaps there is a way to reconceive it. Perhaps the large raft of difficulties towed in the wake of exclusivism and inclusivism can be made less burdensome by a modalized pluralism. Then our more modest position, more in keeping with the finitude and relatedness of all knowledge,³⁴ would be that possibly many faiths as quests for understanding about ourselves and our place in the universe attain truth, but all are surpassable; therefore, the faith that carries one's allegiance may be, at best relatively

adequate, given one's time and place on history's stage. Perhaps differing faiths can reflect, correct, complement, and challenge one another. Many find it unacceptable that there could be many true religions. But mark well: the pluralism asserted here is stated as a possibility, not as established fact known *a priori*, hence the need to engage the others in serious dialogue without *a priori* assimilation of the commitments of the others to those of Christians or reduction of all to a vapid generic religious core, moves typical of inclusivism and pluralism. Note secondly, this position seems to imply a representative rather than a constitutive Christology and ecclesiology, though it leaves open the possibility of the truth of a constitutive Christology and ecclesiology.³⁵ Third, and most importantly, for a Christian, this "pluralistic inclusivism" or "relative absoluteness," which acknowledges real difference without necessarily implying exclusion, pivots on a decisive faith commitment not to be overlooked.³⁶ That is the faith claim that the Christ is decisive in one's life but is also of universal significance, and that Christianity holds "for me" truth and life and the most adequate of self-understandings. A pluralistic inclusivist is not looking to adopt Hindu,

Buddhist or Muslim commitments and is not going to envision the world as framed by those traditions. One will continue to read the world in Christ. Certainly, such faith is not without cultural conditioning. Can any faith be? There is wisdom in an observation central to Rahner's *a priori* theology of the religions: grace always incarnates itself; God's work is not carried out only in the secret recesses of individual hearts. Because we are social beings, faith commitments issue in communal expression; people are shaped by and formative of the religions accessible to them in their culture, religions that for them mediate "salvation" in their small acre of the universe, which is marked by its own epistemic contextuality.³⁷

Christians want to believe that God is present always and everywhere in history making authentic existence a universal possibility. The Christian claim that Jesus Christ is decisive is not a claim that God is found only in Jesus and nowhere else, but that the only God one might possibly discover elsewhere is the God made known in the life and death of Jesus. God's action in Jesus does not differ essentially from the divine action that may occur in other persons and events. Divine presence in Jesus is considered

objective, attribution of Lordship and normativeness to him, subjective. The Lordship of Jesus is decisive for those who experience it to be so.³⁸ But if authentic existence is experienced as mediated through another, and Lordship as residing in that other, then exercise of that Lordship, a Christian believes, can assume no other structure than one homologous with the demand and promise re-presented for Christians in Jesus. What humans hunger for and find in Jesus' message and mode of being is the meaning of life, a reason for the hope they dare not surrender, liberation from sin, suffering, and death, a ground for the perduring value of their loves and their work. All this, re-presented for Christian definitively in Jesus, may be re-presented for non-Christians, wholly or partially, in other ways. To believe that the Christ as central symbol of Christian tradition is normative and decisively powerful is not to assert that the reality symbolized by him cannot be mediated efficaciously by another symbol for another tradition. Given the ambiguity and diversity of our many human worlds, the universal significance of any particular historical person remains a faith hypothesis.

We may test it in our own lives, but ultimate verification remains eschatological.

Now, two observations, one an attempt at a clarification of terms, the other the entertainment of a possibility. first, I want to suggest that the terms “uniqueness” and “finality” may lead to confusion. The logic of uniqueness does not carry on its coattails claims to exclusiveness or onliness.

Uniqueness is rooted in particularity and distinctiveness. Mahler’s 5th symphony is unique. This does not mean there is nothing else comparable, far less that it is the decisive, normative, unsurpassable, only symphony, but simply that it reveals in its own way what beauty is; in its glorious specificity it embodies preeminently what all art has to do with. Further, the particular and the universal, or the relative and the absolute relate dialectically. The former in each pair mediates and reveals the latter in a concrete entity; the latter in each pair gives birth to and renders itself present in the former. A poem may in its unique disclosure of life and death achieve in its limited way universal relevance, despite its cultural and historical relativity. In this sense a cumulative case can be made for the uniqueness of

Jesus and Buddha in their distinctiveness. Such a claim to uniqueness is an inductive historical claim. But the claim to absoluteness, unsurpassability, normativeness and definitiveness (preferable to “finality” in this context) marches to a different logic, the logic of faith, though believers may attempt to ground its credibility in cumulative historical evidence. Such a claim leads us to ask how a particular historical person, admittedly unique, can be the absolute savior and definitive, normative revelation of the Absolute Mystery. Herein lies the idiosyncrasy of faith, and it is not susceptible to purely scientific or even historical kinds of argument. Historical knowledge of Jesus cannot establish that he is the absolute savior; such a claim is the confession of those who experience God’s healing presence in Jesus as the key to a new humanity. So much so that Jesus becomes part of the referential meaning of God. When Christians claim that Jesus is the absolute savior, they do so because of who Jesus was and is and what he did and does for them and in them. As Newman had it, Jesus grasps the believer’s intellect and imagination, creating a certitude born of varied and converging evidence too powerful for refutation. Involved is a participatory knowing leading to a

complex faith act of inference and love, an act not irrational but transcending reason.³⁹ Something similar occurs in serious life situations, in aesthetic and even scientific intuitions.

Such a claim need not entail a demeaning, arrogant exclusivism, nor the inaccessibility of the Absolute in other traditions, where religious ardor will surely, as always, stake claims to uniqueness and absoluteness. All such claims must be contextualized within an awareness that the Absolute mystery is our absolute future and not yet, if ever, fully revealed within the borders of our particularities. Possibly all traditions attain truth but all, as traditions borne by fallible humans, are surpassable. Meanwhile, as we await with hope eschatological verification, the truth of our faith claims may begin to appear solely in dialogue and in being tested in the human struggle for transformation.

It does not follow that commitment to Christianity is a bias that vitiates conversation and study. All thought, choice and action imply at least inchoate metaphysical and faith commitments as to how things actually are with us and our world and what courses of behavior are to be embraced or

shunned. This is so of believers and unbelievers alike. Metaphysical neutrality is an impossibility. Any Christian theology is a critical, imaginative construction of a world whose compass points are God, the cosmos, humanity, and the Christ, a creative response to the need to find an orientation for life in a particular situation. One should strive to be as self-conscious and intellectually honest about these bedrock commitments as possible; neutrality is feigned or fallacious. To come to dialogue empty-headed and empty-hearted is to have nothing to converse about. To think one can and should enter conversation with a mental *tabula rasa* is pure self-deception, in Gadamer's words, "the prejudice against prejudice." Indeed, commitment to Christianity's inherent impulsion to catholicity compels Christians to dialogue and comparative analysis of the practices, texts, and practitioners of other traditions.⁴⁰ Conversely, Christians cannot expect their dialogue partners to step outside their own commitments.

Second, since two of the compass point of an *a priori* theology of the religions are Christology and soteriology, I want to rummage about in the realm of possibility by way of a question. Is it possible that there is a variety

of salvations or fulfillments? Or could it simply be that one and the same salvation is available inside and outside Christianity (as inclusivists maintain) though mediated in diverse ways (as pluralists maintain)? If the former, all these fulfillments would be, from a Christian perspective, at best penultimate or purely anticipatory and prospective to the extent they are not incompatible with the finality of humans as Christianity sees it. Or could they be enduring and definitive for those who attain them, though falling short of the saving fulfillment Christians strive toward? Against the case for one, same salvation inside and outside Christianity (or any “home” tradition) one might argue that there is no cogent reason to assume that those outside the “home tradition will experience, contrary to their prior conditioning and desire, the same fulfillment as those within the “home” tradition. These questions are raised not simply to pique idle curiosity, but rather because they have the heuristic value of pointing up the true otherness of the religions and of fostering dialogue.⁴¹

THE NEED FOR A DOCTA IGNORANTIA

Having wrestled with these issues, we would be well advised to recognize that the “followability” of the religions in their relationship to one another is rimmed by nescience. We always want to see farther than we can, to turn search into possession, to impose on history an intelligibility that eludes our grasp of the whence and whither of us and all else. And so a theology of the religions, like all good theologies, should be guardian of the *docta ignorantia futuri*.⁴² In our study of the beliefs and practices of faithful non-Christians we should rein in curiosity about who gets “saved” and how. Confident of God’s universal salvific will and of the ubiquity of grace, however, Christians will affirm the possibility and the hope that God’s salvific work goes on in all, ourselves included. Judgments, nonetheless, about the sweep of history are God’s (1 Cor 4:5); it is not for us to field detailed accounts of how God may be operative in our wounded selves and our flawed communities. We cannot lift the curtain hung over our history and the love that moves the moon, the sun and other stars. It is for us, rather to meet the more difficult but rewarding challenge of interreligious dialogue.

A docta ignorantia can help Christian put their faith in perspective.

There is, for example, a pronounced eschatological emphasis in the Christocentrism of much contemporary theology that often spills over into the theology of religions. Though biblically warranted, the emphasis (often sheathed in mythological language) needs rethinking in a world newly educated by astrophysics and space exploration (50 billion galaxies we now estimate!). Can the whole of reality revolve around humanity's salvation history? The anthropocentrism that glorifies "man and his world" seems wrong headed when we view minuscule planet earth moving within unimaginable vastness. The eschaton of our, perhaps, very brief history may be only remotely related to a boundless beyond that is independent of human history and impervious to its course. Such perspective begets a humility that affords more realistic assessment of our place in the universe than do eschatological visions bloated with anthropocentrism. We are adrift on a small orb in an immense sea of interstellar space. Are we the center of it all? Are we alone graced with the incarnate revelatory Wisdom of a self-giving

God? Or are there possibly many incarnations, many Christ's? Should we sing with the poet?

...In the eternities

Doubtless we shall compare together, hear

A million alien gospels, in what guise

He trod the Pleiades, the Lyre, the Bear.

O be prepared, my soul,

To read the inconceivable, to scan

The infinite forms of God those stars unroll

When, in our turn, we show to them a man.⁴³

The stage is larger by far than we thought; the drama more complex. The human journey is but a moment in nature's untractable span. This is not to assert the meaninglessness of our history. Basic to Christian faith is the conviction that our history has been assumed as God's own. It is, however, to throw our story and all traditions into a larger perspective. No longer can the West read itself as obvious center of the universe and its history; no

longer can Christianity read itself as the obviously unsurpassable, solely valid religious self-understanding.⁴⁴

THE CHALLENGE OF ONE WORLD

A sea change is occurring in the theology of religions. We are moving beyond the exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism paradigm. This paradigm is a rush to judgment. Displacement of exclusivism by pluralism and inclusivism is understandable in terms of Enlightenment modernity's dream and transcendental theology's sensitivity to the universality of grace, hitherto often considered scarce.⁴⁵ Still, the paradigm reduces complexity to a programmatic proposal that on its own logic is restrictive of rather than open to the possibilities that comparative theology might unleash. Now, however, a new generation of scholars, many expert Buddhologists, Indologists, Islamicists, bring to the problematic new eyes. They confront divergences among traditions rather than vaporizing them away in a haze of presumptive generalities and assumed convergences. Their counterpoint awakens us to the possibility there may be sand at the foundations of the unmodalized paradigm. These area specialist amplify non Western voices. Through their

work detailed data is accumulating that is not as painlessly translatable without distortion or remainder into Christian categories as we had thought.

To translate is to interpret, alter, transform. *Traduttore-traditore!* 46

Numerous are the trials of translation; we note but four. First, while humans resort to plain language, they also resort to signals, allusions, indirect expression, which resist immediate deciphering. There is also the modesty of wordlessness, a sense of a realm language points to but cannot name, a realm that in Eckhart's words is *innominabile et omninominabile*, a realm that only living in the interpretive community can inherit. We have our music, but also an imagined music in our music. Second, because languages are to some extent governed by existing politico-economic power relations, the languages of Third World traditions may be weaker in relation to Western languages and subjected to forcible transformation in translation. There are no innocent interpretations, nor innocent interpreters. Western epistemologies produce and deploy desired knowledge and languages more readily than do Third World mind sets. The discourse furnishing the favored categories for interreligious encounter are embedded in globally dominant

Western discourse. The danger is intellectual re-colonialization, obliteration of the other as other by Western norms and notions.⁴⁷ Doctrines and practices of the other may be corralled within categories deriving from exported Western presuppositions of what constitutes religious thought and practice. These categorizations may even be accepted by Western educated elites representing the other religions. Empire lingers everywhere.⁴⁸ A neo-colonial metalingual approach supplants a needed bilingual competence. Third, the difficulties of translation are compounded by a growing diversity of theologies inside the Christian household (and by increasing numbers of historians of religion not well versed in the Christian traditions). No longer does one mode of theological discourse articulate what is Christian, and by implication, not Christian. Finally, and most difficult of all, learning the semantic registers of the other may require learning to live another form of life. There is no hermeneutical *intelligentia* or *explicatio* without *applicatio*, praxis.⁴⁹ We do not merely think words, we feel them. Because frequently, no amount of listening and watching brings us to see with our own eyes the dreams of another, the hermeneutical task is never purely

cognitive, but existential and ethical as well. Sometimes symbols cannot be known from without but only by indwelling them, by participatory knowing. In the end, however, all translations are tentative, provisional, in process.

Many comparativists, therefore, have no desire to prematurely translate or to take the measure of Eastern traditions by simple appeal to what are considered Christian standards. In the complexity of dialogue, reading, and rereading the evaluation of truth claims must be deferred.

Meanwhile, in a hermeneutics of wager, other religions may be presumed to be sources of a truth about the human and the transcendent that is not disclosed in Christianity. Probably many theologians of the future will sink intellectual roots in multiple traditions. In a new pluralistic inclusivism the non-Christian will come to live within the Christian as non-Christian traditions are transcribed within Christians who integrate them into a new articulation of Christian identity, one better suited to a post-Christian world.⁵⁰ Boundaries may at some points blur. For now, however, ours is a situation of pluralistic complexity that defines easy *a priori* theory construction. Nor are we in a position to mount an *a posteriori* theology of

the religions. Larger syntheses are at least a generation away; comparativists are still learning their trade. For now, we have to be content to live in conversation with the luxuriant diversity pervading religious worlds that contextualize our own.

This challenge to interaction with the great ways of humankind is daunting. Having barely begun, we cannot envision the transformations to occur in Christianity. A fearful journey, but Christocentric faith gravitates toward catholicity. Christianity will be parochial as long as its history is parochial; the only history suited to a faith whose lodestar is incarnate Wisdom is the history of planet earth. For a catholic Christian, love of home gives way to love of every soil, a chance of “belonging” to more than one history.

Christian theology of the religions, however, would lose its identity were it to ground its interaction with the religions not primarily in the universality of divine Wisdom disclosed in the Christ, but solely in some putative religious *a priori* or anthropological constant. The particularities of one’s religion are the door to the universal. To be centered in the

particularity of Jesus, is to enter into his openness to all and his hope for the coming reign of God. It is to cultivate caring openness, not only to one's own, but to the stranger as well. That surely draws into one's circle adherents of other faiths. A tricky coinage this. Needless to say, to be open to the voice of the other is not to deny the need to resist it when necessary. Genuine conversation recognizes and does not retreat from its moments of conflict with the other, nor from the fruitful conflict of interpretations in conversations at home. Conversation may require argument and refutation as well as explanation and understanding. Intellectual honesty cannot politely sidestep argument when those who take seriously what they believe converse with others seriously committed to their own beliefs. To shy away from the *agon* is a hollow irenicism, a cruel kindness that trivializes deep-running convictions. Airing differences, real and radical or merely rhetorical, is profoundly important to anyone committed to truth and its vital import to the well-being of the other.⁵¹

In sum, to be religious today is to be interreligious. Interreligious dialogue will have to become integral to all Christian theologizing. The

demands placed upon scholars will be great, but so too the new possibilities for the Christian community as it is challenged to become ever more catholic. Christianity will be changed, as it was by Paul's marching it into the Gentile world, by Augustine's neo-Platonic Christianity, by Aquinas' integration of Aristotle and the wisdom of the Arabs, and again by Rahner's incorporation of lessons culled from modern philosophy.⁵² To do as will in the years ahead in relation to Hindu and Buddhist wisdom, will demand equal daring and discipline. To contextualize one's tradition along with other traditions is to tap into lodes of new meanings. Neglected riches of the Christian tradition may be retrieved. Established meanings may be extended and enhanced. Meanings perhaps unintended by authors of our texts will occur to newly situated readers. Norms by which we judge ourselves and others will be enlarged by new appreciation of the importance of the linguistic, cultural, and theological contexts that make each tradition what it is. Christian theology will undergo rewriting as it inscribes transformative reading of non-Christian traditions and accordingly reappropriates and reconstructs its identity as catholic.⁵³ If Christian interpretation of the

other is appropriation of a larger framework of meaning and of new possibilities, the possibilities do not remain exactly as they were in their original context. Western Christians turn East only as Western Christians. Eastern traditions change when they travel West. Consider Buddhism's metamorphosis as it entered new contexts. Thus John Cobb can speak of a Christianized Buddhism or a Buddhist Christianity. Horizons are expanded within an analogical imagination exploring a new "this" in terms of a newly perceived "that."⁵⁴ Aside from the Christian imperative to catholicity, there are today moral exigencies that cry out for an interreligious dialogue of liberative praxis. Diverse cultural and religious communities are networked in interdependence as never before. Human survival and flourishing on our planet are threatened by ethnic, tribal, and religious conflicts, ecological crises, nuclear proliferation, and poverty amidst affluence. Massive public suffering abounds as never before. One has to hope that interreligious understanding will make a modest contribution to human cooperation in enhancing the lives of all. The great faiths share, at least, important formal commonalities: the convictions that human fulfillment is dependent on a

transcendent source of meaning; that where humans are alienated from it, a self-destructive potential is unleashed; that this transcendent source grounds the possibility of forms of life that lead to justice and peace, that arrogant absolutizing of human autonomy, the root of so many threats to our humanity, is to be rejected. These common convictions always appear enfolded in the irreducible particularities of each faith. This leads to diverse, even conflicting, doctrinal formulations and practices that generate antagonism.⁵⁵ Diversity, however, does not necessitate divergence; collaboration need not wait for justification derived from doctrinal consensus. Shared formal commonalities and ever-tightening global interdependence should spur us to unearth buried common ground for shared responsibility for prospering the planet. Interreligious dialogue focused on global responsibility and liberative praxis can serve to motivate and enhance the dialogue of shared religious experience and dialogue concerning doctrines.⁵⁶

To what extent Christianity will open itself to the stranger remains to be seen. Commitment to Jesus Christ has frequently been idolatrously

ideological when the relative is absolutized and a partial wisdom triumphally equated with the whole truth. To the extent that Christianity opens itself to other traditions it will become different. Not that it will be less Christian or cease to be Christian altogether. It will simply be taking one more step toward catholicity, the fullness it claims to anticipate in the coming reign of God.

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