

Christianity and other religions: a review of some recent discussion

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Functioning in a multi-religious context is not something new in Christian experience. This was certainly true of the first period of the church's history during which Christians were in constant contact with the religions of Greece, Rome and Egypt and also with Judaism from which Christianity became increasingly differentiated. During this period also Christian missionaries, primarily of the Nestorian church, penetrated far into the east, but rather little is now known of their fate.¹

The Graeco-Roman religion was very diverse conceptually and ritually. Conceptually ideas ranged from animism through polytheism to the more sophisticated ideas of the great Greek philosophers. Ritual practice ranged from the official emperor-worship to the more esoteric initiation ceremonies of the mystery cults. From the beginning Christians realized that they could not ignore the religion from which they called upon people to turn to Christ and this was especially true of its more cultured and philosophical expression.² The story of the relationship between Greek philosophical thought and Christian thought is complex, but that Christians attempted to relate what seemed to them good in the non-Christian thinking which surrounded them to the essence of their own Christian faith is apparent from the beginning. By the time of the fall of Rome to the barbarian hordes Graeco-Roman thought at its best had been either subdued to the interests of Christian

theology or entirely assimilated into the Christian tradition. Much of the debate about the relationship between Christianity and other religions has in fact to do with the extent and nature of the Graeco-Roman influence on Christian thought in this initial period of the church's expansion.

With the collapse of the Roman Empire from the fourth century on the church was again faced with a hostile non-Christian world. The church responded to this strident and virile polytheism/paganism with a vigorous and successful missionary drive, particularly in northern Europe. However, while northern Europe was being won, a huge area of Christian influence, stretching from the Middle East across North Africa through Spain and into southern France, was falling before the advance of Islam. Some of the lost ground was regained eventually, notably in Spain, but by force of arms rather than by Christian proclamation. In fact almost all missionary expansion throughout the Middle Ages was by means of military might, the church going hand in hand with the sword, as in the case of the mediaeval expansion of Greek Orthodoxy in conjunction with the vast eastern expansion of the Russian Empire. Unfortunately this pattern was also followed when European Christianity eventually broke loose from its isolation in the sixteenth century as a result of the discovery of the New World and commercial expansion.

By the eighteenth century vast new worlds had been opened to western European influence and the church rose to the challenge. In 1800 Christianity was still essentially an European religion but by 1900 it was truly universal. This is not to say that the great missionary effort of the nineteenth century was universally successful; to the contrary, little fruit was seen in many countries after years of hard labour. However, some from all lands did respond, so that by 1900 there was an indigenous church in almost every country in the world. But more often than not this great missionary expansion

¹The Mar-Thoma Church in South India might be an exception. See L. Brown, *The Indian Christians of St Thomas* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), pp. 43-63. See also W. G. Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph* (Rawalpindi, 1974).

²Acts 18:28; John 1:1. Cf. D. C. Mulder, 'World Missions and Syncretism', *International Reformed Bulletin*, 35, Oct. 1968, pp. 40f.

The theme of this article does not allow for a thorough treatment of this difficult question but we can note certain points which must be firmly grasped in any attempt to deal with it. The question must not be viewed simply from the human side as seems to be the case with Hick. We must remember that the biblical picture is of an eternally gracious and loving Being who is continually inviting a perverse and rebellious mankind to submit to him as their Creator and Lord in virtue of his Son's redemptive work. God's just condemnation of any man will never be based on man's ignorance but on man's rebellion and wickedness. Man will be judged on the basis of what he knows and not on the basis of what he does not know.

We suspect, however, that Hick would not be satisfied with any assurance that evangelicals do not believe that God condemns myriads of ignorant people to hell simply because they are ignorant. He dislikes the very idea of a God of judgment which is so clearly taught in the Bible and it is this rejection of the biblical view of God which leads him to argue that saving knowledge of God is as available through the non-Christian as it is through the Christian religion.

The way in which he comes to this conclusion is clearly outlined in *God Has Many Names*. From an apparently rather superficial examination of parts of the liturgy of various religious communities in Birmingham he concludes that they are all worshipping the same God under different names. This one God is an infinite Being who is also the Creator and Ruler of the world.¹³ To recognize this Hick believes is to be truly loving and tolerant towards the adherents of non-Christian religions since by doing so we recognize that they, like us Christians, are on the way to God. In fact Hick insists that to hold any contrary view is to be unloving towards non-Christian immigrants in our midst.

This idea that it is impossible to be nice to someone with whom you disagree seems very odd coming from someone who has been bred in the Christian tradition. The true Christian is someone who loves those who disagree with him and who even hate him. Again, is it being loving to a Muslim to tell him that he really worships the same God as the Christian? I doubt whether a devout Muslim would think so.

Again, how tolerant is Hick's view in the last analysis? He claims to be completely undogmatic in rejecting the Christian view that religious truth can be adequately expressed in words, but he comes to what seems like a very clear dogma in his view of the one God whom all worship under different names. Hick's God must also be a personal being with a personal will since he is considered to be both Creator and Ruler of the world. If this is the case then many devoutly religious people, such as the Vedantist Hindu or the Theravada Buddhist must be considered mistaken. In contradiction of many ancient and noble traditions Hick proclaims an emaciated version of the liberal Protestant creed of nineteenth century idealistic philosophers, the fatherhood of God

and the brotherhood of man.¹⁴ It seems as though he sits in an elevated position, proclaiming that we who are committed within our various religious traditions are toiling away towards the summit where he sits, though we are told that we need not abandon our varying paths, even though there is a higher synthetic truth. It is only the Hindu who can rejoice in this approach (and he is not renowned for his tolerance of non-Indian religions).

The striking conclusion that we reach is that the sort of position Hick espouses does an injustice to many devout religious believers and is, therefore, far from tolerant. It is far more loving towards a Muslim, say, to allow him to freely worship and propagate his faith, while offering him the gospel of Jesus Christ than to say to him that his creed and the Christian's are ultimately the same. To allow freedom, while possessing the power of restraint, is an expression of the love of Christ.

One implication of Hick's theology, which he sees very clearly, is that it necessitates a drastic revision of christological thought. The dogma that the same God is worshipped in all the religions calls for a drastic revision of the Christian idea of God. If exclusivism is abandoned then an exalted view of Jesus Christ as the unique incarnation of God must also be abandoned. Again we find ourselves back with the old liberal dogma of the nineteenth century that Jesus was only a simple moral teacher whose God-consciousness made such an impact upon his followers that influenced by Greek thought-forms they eventually made him into God incarnate. Hick finds his support in the so-called radical wing of New Testament criticism, that is, the wing which questions almost entirely the historical content of the New Testament. It is not my place to deal with this issue but simply to note the importance of the defence of the historic witness to Jesus in the New Testament and the original character of traditional Christology. Not that, however, the divinity of Jesus is dependent on New Testament scholarship. Mercifully, the reality of the living and divine Saviour cannot be caged by sinful man.

To me Hick resembles that highly unsatisfactory tradition in liberal Protestantism so prevalent in the last century which, having rejected exclusivism, took a cursory glance at a few sophisticated and literary religious traditions, found a few similarities here and there and, hey presto, proclaimed that all religions are essentially the same! This sort of thinking was very consistent with the imperialistic arrogance of nineteenth century western scholarship, but it is surprising to find such thinking still alive today.¹⁵

¹⁴Hick's position is very close to that of F. Max Müller (1823-1900), one of the 'fathers' of comparative religion in the nineteenth century. He was a prolific author but a good example of his type of thinking can be seen in his *Theosophy or Psychological Religion* (London, 1893).

¹⁵An article expressing similar surprise at Hick's naivety was recently published in *Religious Studies*, 19, Nov. 1983, pp. 75ff. by P. Griffiths and Delma Lewis entitled 'On Grading Religions, Seeking Truth, and Being Nice to People - a Reply to Professor Hick'. Commenting on Hick's view of religion which they describe as 'the inclusivist non-judgmental' they state on p. 76: '... it may seem surprising, given the overwhelming weight of evidence against such a view, that anyone who thinks more than twice about religion and religions could actually hold it'.

¹³John Hick, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

However, there are others such as Ninian Smart or Wilfred Cantwell Smith who, while sharing Hick's abandonment of exclusivism, offer more carefully thought-out alternative views. Despite our somewhat fierce criticism of Hick, it is still possible to appreciate the dilemma facing those who share his position. They are men who place a very high value on religion and who believe that it is absolutely essential to man's future well-being. They also believe that the foundation of reality is to be found beyond the boundaries of material realities; *i.e.*, they believe in a transcendent being which is the source and end of authentic human existence. But then they also believe that no concrete or historical religion can claim to possess exclusive knowledge of this transcendent even though they do contain authentic intuitions of it. This type of scholar is then faced with the inevitable task of trying to describe the authentic intuitions of the transcendent within individual religious traditions with the ultimate aim of constructing a synthesis of the various intuitions which will comprehend the true essence of religion as such.

Hick, in a way which is very reminiscent of the nineteenth century founders of comparative religion, plunges into a morass without hesitation; Ninian Smart is much more cautious. Even so in his *Beyond Ideology, Religion and the Future of Western Civilization* he does attempt a comprehensive theory of religion which he describes as 'transcendental pluralism'.¹⁶ It is a theory according to Smart which recognizes the reality of 'the Beyond' and yet respects the different experiences of it. It is worth noting that it is a presupposition that the same 'Beyond' is experienced in the various religious traditions. The obvious problem which arises for such a theory is the fact that religions apparently contradict one another in their definitions of 'the Beyond'. How can one say that what religion A says about the transcendent reality and what a religion B says about it are both true if they contradict one another? Smart bravely faces this problem at its most glaringly obvious in seeking to find some complementarity between the Christian and Buddhist view of the Beyond. On the surface the problem seems unsurmountable since Christianity is founded on the assertion of personality while Buddhism is founded on the denial of personality. To watch Smart's convoluted attempts to find a reconciliation between these two contradictory approaches to religion is very instructive: it shows very clearly that 'comparative religion' has become so problematical by now that it is in danger of dying the death of a thousand and one qualifications! But what of Smart's conclusion? One conclusion, which is also a presupposition, is that doctrines are relatively unimportant. It is the effect that the doctrine has on the believer that is of primary importance and not the doctrine itself.¹⁷ Therefore, if the Christian idea of God and the Buddhist idea of

¹⁶Ninian Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 14. Cf. p. 28: 'All religions are true but the most true is that which recognizes . . . this truth. If Christ is divine, so also is Krishna and so in the last resort are all human beings.'

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 185. The root of this pragmatic approach is probably William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London, 1902).

Emptiness (*Sunyata*) have the same effect then they can be said to be complementary witnesses to one transcendent reality. However, if the effects of a concept are to be seen in religious experience and moral behaviour then it is patently obvious that the Christian and Buddhist concepts of ultimate reality do not have the same effects. An even more pertinent criticism is the fact that it is only through the concept that its effects can be described. The religious experience of a Buddhist monk, *e.g.*, can only be appreciated by means of his concept of the Beyond. Smart himself seems to realize this because, having argued for the primacy of the effects, he goes on to try to prove the complementarity of Buddhist and Christian concepts. If he had been really convinced of his conclusion silence would have been the only path open to him! What we find him doing, rather, is trying to fit Christian concepts into a Buddhist framework. For example, the term 'blank' is used when describing the Christian doctrine of the essential incomprehensibility of God, so that the Christian doctrine can be brought closer to the Buddhist idea of the 'void'. He attempts to bring the Christian idea of self-denial within the ambit of the Buddhist idea of not-self (*anatta*).¹⁸

This train of thought culminates in what is now probably a rather outmoded Anglo-Catholic view of the eucharist. According to this view the central truth of the Christian revelation is the incarnation, which is interpreted in terms of the deity divesting or emptying himself of his divine attributes in becoming man. The climax of this process of self-emptying was the suffering of the cross, and thus the eucharist, as the means by which Christ's suffering is made efficacious to men, has the idea of self-emptying at its heart. On the basis of such reasoning Smart's final conclusion is that it is 'ludicrous for Christians to try to convert good Buddhists' because the two religions are merely 'different ways of going towards the Beyond'.¹⁹

It is very questionable, however, whether Smart has proved his case, since he was forced seriously to misrepresent Christian belief in order to bring it anywhere near to Buddhist belief. From the most superficial study of the Christian religion as a historical and contemporary phenomenon it is nonsense to suggest that there is a 'form of emptiness' at its heart. In fact the term which should be used to describe the Christian idea of the Beyond is the opposite of emptiness, fullness (*plēroma*). Christianity is intensely *full*. And is it not true that at the heart of Christianity we have the historical person of Jesus Christ? He is the heart, head and soul of the Christian faith and his self-emptying is not viewed in

¹⁸An earlier attempt at this has been made by Lynn de Silva in *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity* (London, 1979). In trying to prove that the Buddhist concept of *anatta* is very close to the Christian idea of self-denial he engages in a very radical reappraisal of biblical anthropology. While agreeing that Christian thought on this issue has been heavily influenced by the Greek idea of immortality, I cannot agree that there is an ontological denial of the self in the Bible while such a denial is of the essence of the Buddhist idea of *anatta*. If de Silva had concentrated more on the theology of the Bible rather than on its anthropology he would not have confused the ontological idea of *anatta* with the ethical idea of self-denial.

¹⁹Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

terms of the negating of his personality but in terms of the presenting of his person in all its fullness to be sacrificed for the good of others. Smart, like Hick, may attempt to melt Jesus away in the mists of a new transcendental idealism, but in doing so the essence of Christianity is left behind and the new synthetic religion becomes merely a figment of a few scholars' imaginations with no link to historical reality whatsoever. And then there is the eucharist. Smart argues that the essential meaning of the eucharist is the incarnational-moral idea followed by some Anglo-Catholic idealists (*i.e.* God giving up divinity, and 'becoming'). But why should this somewhat esoteric idea of the eucharist be regarded as the essential idea? Should not a scholar who is attempting to compare Christianity and Buddhism honestly describe what Christians have generally believed on a particular issue? On the question of the eucharist the overwhelming conviction of Christians throughout the ages has been that the sacrament is in some sense linked with the idea of sacrifice, the shedding of blood to make atonement for man's sin, so that men and God might be reconciled. The incarnationalist idea of the sacrament as a symbol of God divesting himself of his transcendence in becoming united with man is at the most only a supplementary view.

It seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that the inclusivist view of religion is untenable because all those who attempt a synthesis seem to fall foul of their own presuppositions. They insist upon tolerance for all but always end up by grossly misrepresenting what religious believers actually believe. That some persist despite seeing this problem is amazing. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *e.g.*, believes that 'a theology of comparative religion' will emerge in the future and seems to suggest that it might come along the path of mysticism but he refuses to make any concrete suggestions as to what its content might be.²⁰ Meantime we must be content with being good Christians, good Hindus, *etc.* Another inevitable consequence of attempting a synthesis is the creation of a new religion. What we have here is another example of the 'ecumenical syndrome', *i.e.* if you attempt to unite two denominations you actually end up with three! What is Hick's idea that adherents of various religions worship the same God or Smart's transcendental pluralism? Their low view of Christ means that their views are not Christian in the historical sense of that term at least. Their views come near to neo-Vedanta in Hinduism in some respects but they would not want to be called Hindus because to be identified with one religious tradition would defeat the purpose of the whole exercise. They must, therefore, represent a new entity, a new religion. So in the last analysis they are but exasperating a situation of division and diversity which they set out to transcend. But then what of their religion? It is extremely abstract, vague, philosophical and academic and seems to bear very little relation to the realities of religious life. Religious history does not lay out much hope for its survival.

²⁰W. Cantwell Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 181, 194.

One point which the criticism of Hick and Smart highlights is the fact that any attempt to define the essential content of various religions is in itself a religious exercise. No assessment of various religions can be made but from the vantage-point of some prior religious commitment. And, of course, at the root of all such thinking is not only some specific view of the transcendent but also a specific view as to the way in which that transcendent communicates with man. Some doctrine of revelation is thus implicit in every theory of religion.

Within the Christian tradition the subjective theory became dominant, particularly among Protestants at the beginning of this century, and it is this theory that made possible the views of Hick and Smart. This view holds that the transcendent makes itself known to men in such a way as to make it impossible for that revelation to be truthfully expressed in words. According to this view God cannot speak: it is only man who can speak. Revelation itself is essentially non-verbal. Man having experienced it then seeks to express it in words and in so doing reduces it to the conditions of his nature which is sinful and subject to the limitations of time and space. True knowledge of the transcendent is, therefore, essentially a subjective matter and religious doctrines or theologies are but an unworthy attempt at expressing the impossible.²¹ That the attempt to verbalize the revelation is inevitable is recognized but every attempt is ultimately a failure. Granted, the application of this view to various apparently contradictory doctrines makes possible an unity at the subjective level, but of course, the idea that unity can be achieved at the subjective level is itself an unworthy verbalization!

It is not at all surprising that those who espoused this liberal Protestant view of revelation and who were also students of comparative religion often believed that the essence of religion was to be found in some form of mysticism.²² What is more interesting, maybe, is that many who shared this subjective view of revelation still believed that Christianity was the supreme religion. Theoretically this view reduced all religions to the same level. Since man as man is essentially religious, *i.e.* open to contact with the divine, then attempts at verbalizing religious experience are inevitable everywhere. Therefore the theologian cannot possibly ignore the world's non-Christian religious traditions but he must assess their basic principles and practices in turn and then compare them with one another.

It was as a result of this exercise that many liberal Protestant students of comparative religion came to what they believed to be the objective and scientific conclusion that Christianity is at the apex of man's religious development. What these scholars have almost universally failed to understand, however, is that having

²¹This view of revelation was first used as a basis for a theory of religion in Britain by F. D. Maurice in *The Religions of the World and their Relations to Christianity* (2 1848, pp. 8-9).

²²W. Cantwell Smith still looks to the mystics as a door of hope for a synthetic view of religion: 'Moreover, as a matter of sober fact, in the past it is primarily the mystics who have produced religious statements that can at all legitimately be called a theology of religions' (*op. cit.*, p. 126).

accepted a subjective idea of revelation their ideas about the essence of Christianity or the essence of any other religion and finally about the essence of religion as such are inevitably going to be subjective. With painful regularity the essence of religion turns out to be what we know the scholar himself believed. This was true of older scholars such as F. Max Müller in the nineteenth century or E. O. James in this century and it is also true of John Hick and Ninian Smart. A is true religion *a* and B is true religion *b* simply because an individual scholar feels that it is true. There is no objective authority for these scholars' dogma other than their own feelings on the matter in the final analysis.

It should be obvious by now that there is at least one position which avoids the scholarly tyranny of the liberal Protestant view of religion and that is the traditional Christian conviction that God can speak and that he has spoken. This very reasonable belief that the God who made men able to communicate with one another in words can also communicate with men in words which are true does at least provide an objective criterion by which man's diverse religious life and experience can be understood. Here I do not judge the revelation but the revelation judges me. Every thought, word and deed can be brought to the bar of God's will as revealed in the Bible – and this not only includes the non-Christians but the Christians also. In this sense Christianity as one of the great religions of the world cannot be regarded as the absolute religion since it too is subject to, and often in need of, the judgment of God's Word revealed in the

Bible.²³ It is only by means of a divine and objective criterion of truth that one can distinguish ultimately between truth and error within Christianity itself as well as between Christianity and other religions and also within non-Christian religions themselves. Modern scholars such as Cantwell Smith²⁴ are right to emphasize the complexity of each individual religious tradition. *E.g.*, it is ridiculous to talk in terms of comparing Christianity and Hinduism since neither of them is a monolithic structure but they are in fact a cluster of different religions within themselves. It is difficult to see much similarity between a devout Roman Catholic going on his knees for miles to the shrine of Fatima in Portugal and the morning worship of Evangelical Brethren! The object of belief and the type of devotion are poles apart. There is probably much more similarity between the Fatima pilgrimage and the Perikrama of Vrindaban²⁵ than with the worship of the Brethren. Such comparisons just highlight the point that without some objective reference there would be no hope whatsoever of making any sense at all of the glorious chaos of the world of religions.

²³This is some way similar to Karl Barth's position. Cf. J. Hick and B. Hebblethwaite (eds.), *Christianity and Other Religions* (London, 1980), pp. 32ff. for a brief outline of his position by Barth himself. However, we suspect that Barth does not escape from subjectivism because of the gulf that he opens between the Word and the biblical witness to him.

²⁴W. Cantwell Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

²⁵Klaus Klostermeier, *Hindu and Christian in Vrindaban* (London, 1969), pp. 14ff.