

# RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND OUR UNDERSTANDING OF GOD

## With spécial Reference to Luther's Theology

As far as we can go back in human history we find a multiplicity of languages, cultures and religions. Thus has religious pluralism been a fact for millenia, most probably from the very beginning of human history. What is new is that we become increasingly aware of that fact. But even this is not a new phenomenon since religions called world religions are the result of processes of mutual assimilation and dissimilation. There is neither a "pure" Buddhism nor a "pure" Christianity, but always a religion embedded in a specific situation which is different from other situations. The New Testament itself bears testimony to this multiplicity as we know very well from historical - critical research.

What is then new today? I suggest it is the growing awareness that religious pluralism is not a *scandalon* or an imperfect reflection of something different, but that it is a productive, positive element of the human situation, wanted by God and part of his good creation. The following remarks are intended to reflect this hypothesis in the light of Christian systematic theology, particularly of its understanding of God. Specifically, in this context I will refer to Luther's experience of God.

### I. Hermeneutics and Apologetics

A first remark concerns theological methodology in a situation of religious pluralism. Theological endeavour could be described as both hermeneutical and apologetical. *Hermeneutics* is as it were the inner circle which marks the search for theological identity. It is the attempt to listen and to investigate into a meaning which is believed to be given beforehand. Hermeneutics has always both a diachronical and a diatopical aspect. Our perception, being conditioned by time and space categories, makes any possible meaning dependent on those relative criteria. It follows that the same "meaning" can never be the repetition of a formulation when this framework of time and space has changed. A meaning is to be translated, not just in a different

language (which would be conceived of as having "fixed" terminology), but into a different phase of a whole and new reality which itself is relative in the time/space continuum. To determine the parameters of such a time/space - bound situation is precisely the apologetic task. *Apologetics*, therefore, is not just the proclamation of the meaning (of the gospel) and the refutation of opposite views which would come *after* a proper hermeneutical study. Apologetics is a moment in the hermeneutical task itself. There is an intrinsic connection between hermeneutics and apologetics: both condition each other, give each other a specific frame of reference and uphold each other. However, they are not identical. If we call hermeneutics the inner circle, we can consider apologetics as the outer circle. Or better: hermeneutics looks into an encircled meaning, whereas apologetics is aware of the conditioned relation of any possible meaning to a specific context. It is the relation of texture to context in a continuous process of contextualization. This process is nothing else than the continuation of God's incarnation in the field of theology. Therefore, I suggest that the polarity of hermeneutics and apologetics has an eschatological quality in as much as it expresses the efficacy of the Gospel. It is not talk *about* a God who acted in the past; it is God's talk in the present, a continuation of his salvific work in history.

Viewed in this way, our awareness of the present situation, which we had characterized as situation of awareness of religious pluralism, has theological significance. It is more than an adaptation of old views into a new situation. Rather, the content itself determined by hermeneutics in the apologetical process is being explicated creatively. But this would lead us already to a Trinitarian foundation of interreligious dialogue to which I will come later.

Before that, however, I would like to discuss a few issues which arise in our attempt to speak about God.

## II. Concepts of God

Concepts of God are also concepts of man. Any concept reflects human categories and intentions. Since man is historically conditioned, his categories and intentions are conditioned as well. What follows is that concepts of God undergo the process of historical conditioning. Thus, pluralism derived from the very historical situation of the human phenomenon is the natural state of affairs with regard to our understanding and concepts of God as there

are human beings. This is the very nature of the existential situation of man. Even if we postulate (or believe in) a divine revelation which explicates a transhistorical and unconditioned truth, we have to concede that this revelation is conditioned in as much as it is *understood*. Understanding is conditioning. Even more so where the Christian revelation is concerned: here, conditioning in historical and existential terms is not simply a secondary process on the level of human receptivity (over against divine oneness which would remain abstract); it is the very nature of the revelation itself to *be* in the process of conditioning. This is called incarnation. We have to beware of any docetic misinterpretation particularly when it comes to a theological understanding and evaluation of religious pluralism. All our hermeneutical tools have to be seen in this perspective. The incarnational method of Christian faith is reflected in any relationship expressed in terms of *Heilsgeschichte* or salvation history, and in the correlative way in which we frame our questions and answers. Since any method - being a way in a specific situation - is conditioned we can conclude: Christian revelation, due to its incarnational character, is in itself the truth about the human situation in its relation to God in showing the pluriformity of this situation. This situation is a way, a people on the way, a process, a dynamic *metanoia*, etc., in other words: it is bound by - or better: freed for - a pluralism which avoids divinization of conditioned relatives. Nevertheless, for the sake of explication of truth, the "Word made flesh" has a *specific* meaning though this specification may be understood and interpreted differently in different places and at different times. Since the individual dimension of man is just one side of the question, we have to be aware of the community aspect i.e. of the social dimension of the human being as well. To this belongs the realm of language. Language would be impossible without coherence; it needs stability that avoids chaos and secures consistent meaning across space and time, in accordance to patterns which are themselves, of course, historically conditioned. Without this coherence man could not find any identity. Without such an identity he could not be called by God, or, in other words, the "relative Absolute" of a coherent understanding *across* time and space is a theological necessity. The question is only which concept of God would reflect most adequately both the incarnational truth of historicity of any understanding and the

need for continuity/ stability which is the precondition for meaning in the process.<sup>1</sup>

In this perspective I would like to discuss briefly four different ways of understanding God.

### 1. *Exclusivistic theism*

One model of understanding God which seems to be rather prevalent at least on the level of a more popular understanding of Christian God-talk is what one could call exclusivistic theism. Here, God is understood as a being or even as superessential being, yet defined over against what is called "world" or "creation". The very process of separating God from what is not God (expressed most radically in the metaphor of the "otherness" of God) ascribes limitations in scope and dimension to what is called God, fixing a kind of borderline between the two realms. Hegel would have called this concept a limited Absolute or "bad infinity". It tends to find substantialistic expressions precisely because of this "stagnation" of God at the border of finitude. Such a God gets more and more absolute, i.e. absolved from the processes of history which make the world of multiplicity. It is a metaphysical construct which clashes deeply with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as Pascal rightly observed. Whereas the biblical experience is that of an acting and deeply involved God who is the moving Spirit in the process of creation-salvation-new creation, this metaphysical being, defined by its own limits of substantialistic categories, is more or less irrelevant to the ordinary occurrences of a pluralistic world, a problem which culminates in philosophical deism. This God is pure, one and absolute, but absolutely irrelevant. Attempts to reconcile this God with the spectrum of pluralistic historical experience do necessarily fail. The result is a world which has freed itself from "God", claims to have achieved this freedom in the name of its autonomy, praises this catastrophe even in kerygmatic terms with the result of falling into an abyss of human despair and aimlessness. I am afraid that what I am describing here is much of our present spiritual situation in Western Christianity. It is the spirit not of Gospel freedom but of human autonomy or reason, even if it is proclaimed in the name of biblical faith.

1 See my study *Einheit der Wirklichkeit, Gott, Gotteserfahrung und Meditation im hinduistisch-christlichen Dialog*, Chr.Kaiser: Munchen, 1986, and R.Seeberg, *Dogmengeschichte IV,1. Die Lehre Luthers*, Leipzig, 1933, p.235

Whatever, it is, such a God tends to deny pluriformity, because it requires definition and a static formulation of truth. Viewed over against this background, religious pluralism is an imperfection to be overcome because God is one and the same: pluralism seems then to tarnish his purity. Coming back to our initial remarks, it is obvious that such an understanding of God does promote doctrinal intolerance and social hegemonic attitudes. The result may well be totalitarianism in all its different forms. It goes without saying that this is an undesirable view which, to start with, does not at all reflect the pluriformous situation of the New Testament. My point is that the cause for this dilemma is a theistic-absolutistic view of God, a static monotheism which is not an adequate interpretation of biblical faith. It is much more a reflection of human pride and possessiveness, i.e. of sin. "What your heart is concerned with is your God", says Luther, and the heart creating such an understanding is moved by jealousy, not by unconditional love and ultimate concern for what has no limitation and definition. What does not have definition is freedom. What explicates itself in love on the basis of this freedom is the integrative principle of its own energies and movements, as patristic theology seems to teach us. This does not only allow but require pluriformity as the other pole of oneness.

## 2. *Nothingness or Emptiness*

In order to avoid the dangers of theism, an a-theistic image of God has been proposed, not in the sense of modern atheism, but as an expression of religious awe and humility in view of the inexpressibility of God in human terms. This is the moving force behind all negative theology which found probably its first expression in the upanisadic *neti...neti* (not this... not that) and was systematized in Buddhist philosophy from where it travelled into the Hellenistic culture to be eventually inherited by Christianity under the influence particularly of Denys the Areopagite. It has shaped much of Christian parlance of God, especially in the mystical tradition.

It is not possible here to move into the details of the Buddhist concept of *śunyata* (*emptiness*) where this understanding of "God" is most clearly developed. Yet, some remarks might be useful for our understanding of religious pluralism.

The concept of emptiness is the central teaching of Mahāyāna - Buddhism though equivalent tendencies can be traced back already to earlier Buddhist writings. It has found its philosophical interpretation

in Nāgārjuna's philosophy of Mādhyamika. The meaning of this concept is that things do not have any inherent existence. There are no substances, attributes and determinations but total interplay, process and interpenetration of what appears to be isolated substances or attributes. There is only suchness. Thus substantialism is completely avoided. The original Buddhist teaching of dependent origination (*Pratītyasamūpāda*) is interpreted in such a way that it expresses the essence of emptiness: non-substantiality. Things, including concepts, do not owe their existence to some self-nature (*svabhāva*); they are what they are beyond the perceptible level of attributes, qualities and differentiation, i.e. they are pure suchness. Though on the level of ordinary perception -the level of multiplicity- things are differentiated (*samvṛti satya*), in deeper insight (*prajñā*), however or on the level of absolute truth (*paramārtha satya*), all is one suchness. Therefore, pluriformity and oneness are not ontological contradictions but epistemological levels. Both levels are necessary for interpreting reality properly. Yet, the relative level of pluriformity is being negated dialectically into the higher level of oneness since oneness encompasses the relative differentiation. Things and concepts, therefore, are appearances of the one process devoid (empty) of self-nature. The underlying ground of oneness is to be perceived directly by transrational experience. This experience dawns when the mind is stilled and all levels of consciousness are unified.

There are different schools of interpretation in Buddhism. Some thinkers cannot avoid a tendency towards "subordination", i.e. devaluation of the empirical multiplicity. Others do avoid it. Generally speaking both movements are represented in Mahāyāna, the one tending to devalue historical multiplicity, the other appreciating differentiated multiplicity. It is obvious that such a concept of reality can appreciate religious pluralism as a manifestation of its own principle of interpenetration of the aspects of reality or of reality as total interrelatedness.

### 3. God as all - permeating presence

This model of understanding of God can be found in all religions. God is not just an external cause for the existence of the world but the inner energy of its sustenance. He is the "inner ruler" (*antaryāmin*), as expressed in the Vedāntic view, or the presence of the Spirit, as experienced in the Christian tradition.

Here I want to focus on this type of understanding of God in Protestantism, specifically in Luther. We certainly have to differentiate between levels and models in Luther's talk on God. There are tendencies and developments in his thinking and dynamic perception of the human situation *coram Deo*, which cannot be reduced to certain *understandings*. They express an experience of "standing under" the judging and justifying grace in faith as *simul iustus et peccator*. Nevertheless, I want to focus on certain expressions, certain currents in his thinking which, if properly developed, could be fruitful for our theological interpretation of religious pluralism.

a) The Trinitarian Approach and *theologia crucis*

For Luther, God is one in all his different actions. This oneness is grounded in the innertrinitarian relations. It is only for us that distinctions of creator, redeemer and faith-creating Spirit come into play. There is an intrinsic correspondence between *personalis pluralitas* and *unitas naturae et essentiae* (WA 42,17,2f; 167, 7ff.).

Yet, it is in his revelation that God wants to be known. Any other attempt to know God comes close to human hybris because man could only project his own ideas and images onto a screen he would call God (WA 56,177, 9f.). In revelation God appropriates himself *pro nobis*, and this is sufficient to know his love and grace. But he is and remains also the almighty and predestining God. In front of the *deus absconditus* man shall take refuge in the *deus revelatus* who is - as *deus incarnatus* - the assurance of salvation (WA 18,684f.).

Since all activity of God is to be interpreted in a trinitarian way, it is obvious that even creation has to be seen in this light: as Father God is source of creation; as Son he is the Word calling creation *ex nihilo* into being; as Spirit he is protecting love which draws back the whole creation unto the heart of God where it receives a new being and stability in the Word (WA 10/1,1,182 - 187; WA 42, 27, 1ff.). Appropriations do not at all destroy the unity of God's acting in three persons.<sup>2</sup>

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2 R. Jansen, *Studien zu Luthers Trinitätslehre*, Frankfurt a.m., 1975, pp.208f.

Similarly, redemption is the work of the whole Trinitarian God. The father is the source from which human beings lost in sin are called back through and by the Word, renewed in the Spirit and thus drawn into the Son or into *conformitas Christi*.<sup>3</sup> Hence creation and redemption are two aspects of one process called salvation history. In the Son, God gives himself; in the Spirit, he sustains everything (WA 14,101,24; 24, 30,20 - 29). God as Spirit is the bond which unifies creation (WA 12,450,7ff.). Because he is one in himself, he grants and works oneness. Differentiations into single acts such as creation, redemption, etc. are meaningless if seen *sub specie Dei*.

Luther stresses the *humanity of God* in revelation, because that is where we can know and grasp him (WA 34/1,147). The *Sacramentum incarnationis* is basically the *crux Christi* in which the wills of the Father and of the Son are most essentially unified. Inasmuch as we get to know the cross, we are freed from the Ego into unity with the will of God, i.e. we get communion with God (WA 5,128f). Since man comes to his proper self - understanding through the cross (he recognizes his sinfulness), it is *the way* to realize *fides sola gratia*. Therefore Luther holds uncompromisingly: *crux sola est nostra theologia* (WA 5,176,32f.).

This thought-form, it seems to me, is Luther's hermeneutical key. It can be found again and again, reflected in his understanding of justification, of law and gospel as well as in his doctrine of the Word. What follows with regard to our topic is that pluralism is part of the human situation under the cross; it is the reality of the human perspective. It is to be accepted and we must work with it. But it is part of the broken human situation that requires redemption. It is redeemed and unified in God only, and only *sub specie Dei* can we anticipate oneness and unity in conformity with Christ. Living in this conformity with Christ is to live under the cross. Therefore, no human being can claim to present or represent the whole. Hence, to accept pluralism is to accept our limitation in humility, and claims of universality, absoluteness, etc. have nothing to do with such a genuine *theologia crucis*.

#### b) The Universal Presence of God

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3 H. Prenter, *Spiritus Creator, Studien Zur Theologie Luthers*, München, 1954, p.197.



What I want to discuss here is to be seen in the context of Luther's Christocentric understanding of revelation, and yet it is a rather independent and very powerful aspect of his personal faith and piety, influencing much of his life, prayer, love for music, etc. as repeatedly and beautifully expressed in the famous table talks.

As explained above, the salvific action of the Trinitarian God is a time-bound process only for us. For God the "succession of time" is external presence. The different moments of the historical process, i.e. the successive aspects in the pluralistic order of phenomena, are simultaneous for him. They are a differentiated oneness, very much like the persons of the Trinity. The most interesting text in this regard is Luther's comment that the Day of Judgement is already present and that it is only in our perspective that the state of perfection is something to be expected from the future (WA 45,175,1ff.).<sup>4</sup> Only in human perspective God changes (*Deus est mutabilis quam maxime.*) and sets forth pluriformity and multiplicity, i.e. God himself is the source of pluralism, including the religious one. In himself, however, God remains one and the same. Change to him is external and a mode of human perception (*verum haec mutatio extrinsecus est*) (WA 56,234,7ff.).

Luther's understanding of the relationship between God and world is most explicitly stated in connection with his arguments for the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. God is present in the whole of reality as creator and preserving energy. He is the almighty power "who at the same time cannot be anywhere and yet has to be everywhere" (WA 23,133,21f.).<sup>5</sup> Luther obviously accepts *Nicolas de Cusa's* idea of God as *coincidentia oppositorum* in order to argue that God's all-presence is not bound by our categories of space and time (WA 26,339,39ff.): God is present both in the innermost being of any creature and in the external appearance of the same (WA 23,135,3ff.). He can be there "deeper, more interior and more present than the creature is to itself and yet again cannot be anywhere and cannot be comprised by anything so that He comprises all things and is within everything, But nothing comprises him and is in him" (WA

4 Cf. for a more detailed analysis of the implications of these arguments, *Einheit der Wirklichkeit, op.cit.*, Ch.7.

5 "Welche zu gleich nirgent sein kan und doch an allen orten sein mus" (WA 23,133,21f.)

23,137, 33ff.)<sup>6</sup> What Luther teaches here is not pantheism, but a kind of pantheism which is just the opposite of abstract theism as outlined in the beginning. Certainly, those statements have to be understood in the apologetical situation of his struggle with the Swiss reformers. But if our initial reflection on the relationship between apologetics and hermeneutics is valid, these arguments have to be given more attention than is usually done, especially in connection with our analysis of the Trinitarian implications of Luther's theology of the cross.

For Luther, God is perfectly immanent in reality as it is most astonishingly revealed in the incarnation of Christ; but simultaneously he is totally transcendent, "*ausser und über alle creatur*" (WA 23,135, 35ff.). With Luther's understanding of God, the usual alternative between transcendence and immanence is overcome as a false dilemma and this understanding is precisely the basis for a much clearer appreciation of the *extra nos* of all divine activity.<sup>7</sup>

We have to add that the mode of God's presence in all creatures is hiddenness. He is omnipresent, yet cannot be grasped because he is unbound and free (WA 23,133,26). That is why he wants and is to be known in his Word,<sup>8</sup> i.e. in the revelation in Jesus Christ which contains all the criteria for a proper understanding of his presence. Only from the content of revelation is light shed on the reality of the omnipresence in creation.

#### 4. Trinitarian Transtheism

The Trinitarian view of God transcends any mono-theistic abstraction. We fail often to realize that a Trinitarian understanding of *God* does not only require a Trinitarian view of the *world*, but also a Trinitarian interpretation of the *relationship* between God and world. I have argued elsewhere that this has been achieved metaphorically most perfectly by John of Damascus' term of *Perichoresis*: One is in

6 "tieffer, ynnerlicher, gegenwertiger denn die creatur yhr selbs ist, und doch widderrumb nirgent and ynn keiner mag and kan umbfangen sein, das er wol alle ding umbfehret and drynten ist. Aber keines yhn umbfehret and ynn yhm ist"(WA 23,137.33ff.).

7 G. Ebeling. *Luther, Einführung in sein Denken*, Tübingen, 1964, p.305.

8 We cannot dwell here on Luther's understanding of the Word; cf. M. Junghans, "Das Wort Gottes bei Luther während seiner ersten Psalmenvorlesung," in *ThLZ* 1975, 3, pp. 161-174.

the other and, by the very process of interpenetration realizes the reality of the other. The consequence is a total interpenetration of all aspects of reality. I cannot go into details of the theological argument here.<sup>9</sup> I want only to discuss a few consequences which are relevant for our evaluation of religious pluralism.

Perichoresis is unity in differentiation in the process of self-generation.<sup>10</sup> God's being is in continuous becoming. His very nature is the continuous act of self-unification and self-differentiation of all aspects and processes or Trinitarian dimensions. This is the key for an interpretation of the personhood of God: "Person" means more than "individuality" which could be defined as being relatively contained in itself. Personhood, however, is being in relationship with other beings. Its very self-identity is not containment in itself but interrelationship. That is why the deepest expression of personhood is unconditional love. By his nature, the Trinitarian God is personhood and love in himself transcending all limiting determinations which would result from a false individualization of God. God is not substance, but person, i.e. energetic exchange. That is probably the meaning of the metaphor of the "living God". Pluralism, therefore, is one aspect of the process of the history which God *is*. The other pole is unity, and the two complement each other in the continuous process of self-unification in self-differentiation.

This has consequences for the understanding of creator and creature. God is not separated from creature, but the world is *in* God, from the very beginning and essentially. That God loves the world is an expression of his freedom, which he does not "have", but which he *is*. Love in freedom is the self-expression of his very being. Connecting this insight with Luther's understanding of the omnipresence of God as explained above we can say that God indwells creatively in all processes; he is not merely creator at the beginning of the world. This has always been the teaching of Christian theology in the doctrine of *creatio continua*. My specific point, however, is that this is not an accidental or secondary determination but an essential expression of the very nature of God. What I want to

9 Cf. *Einheit der Wirklichkeit*, chapters and 12-14.

10 Cf. my concept of "identify in differentiation" which corresponds also with the Buddhist notion of *Sūnyata* (M. von Brück, "Sūnyata in Madhyamika Philosophy and the Christian Concept of God," in *Jeevadhara* 78, Nov. 1983, pp. 385ff.)

suggest, therefore, is that any creative pluralism could be referred to this understanding of God. Jesus Christ constitutes the criterion of what is and what is not to be regarded as creative. He is the prototype or better the very self-expression of God's personal being, i.e. total interrelationship in love. As such he is the very being or reality as it really is.

Since process, change, history, integration of poles, etc. require pluralism, it is obvious that pluralism in the world is an expression of God's creative presence. The question is only whether this pluralism is really integrative and personal or whether it tends to lead into isolation, mutual projections and finally destructive competitiveness. Thus, the Trinity is not only the model but the implicate ground of a world which is a system of ever unifying pluralities.

### III. Religious Pluralism as Process of Reconciliation

Concluding these suggestions for a Trinitarian understanding of God and calling for an integrative pluralism as the fundamental description of reality I would like to outline some consequences concerning the significance of religious pluralism.

If reality is a net of relationships of polar processes integrating itself continuously to wholes and subwholes, the rhythm of human life, individually and socially, should correspond with this basic pattern. God would be both the ground, the driving force and final goal of this process; and all these three dimensions are expressions of what we call God's love. Personhood is precisely this interrelationship, and that is why God is not a-personal but personal or better even trans-personal since he transcends every configuration achieved in the Trinitarian process. This view would not only be an excellent basis for a proper understanding of religious pluralism, since pluralism is a precondition for personhood; it would also put the theological argument right into the discussion with modern science and could maybe give a new impetus to the *fides quaerens intellectum*.

If reality is interrelationship creating itself according to a basic spiritual pattern/person which we call God, freedom is the nucleus of this process. Since there is newness explicating the implicate, the one-sidedness of chance or necessity is avoided. This is a sound basis for trust into reality and its history which is so much needed today. It

is liberating at the same time, since *no* formation is the ultimate or the final goal. The goal remains beyond though totally *in* all processes.

Hence there is no compulsion to achieve perfection under historical conditions. The attempt to achieve perfection (also in dogmatic expressions, life styles etc.) has something to do with self-justification. Instead, in the process of on-going creation, everything is continuously broken up; failure need not be denied and this is a liberating aspect of the gospel, indeed even *contra perfectionem religionis*. There is no compulsion to be perfect in unity without pluriformity, no yoke of collective sameness, but a continuous process of unification which remains itself pluriformous. The unity is an indicative, not an imperative; but, like the union of the *perichoresis*, it remains continuously in movement, in becoming. It is our task to integrate ourselves into this process, to be open to be moved. This is the foundation for a genuine spiritual equanimity founded in faith and grace. We owe this kind of equanimity to a world of hatred and of so many absolute - i.e. sinful - claims. It allows for pluralism which is a precondition for true humanness. This equanimity expresses itself perhaps most profoundly in a humorous stance towards the shadowy sides of pluralism. This humour is a gift of grace founded in the experience of participation in the Trinitarian love.

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