

CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD OTHER RELIGIONS: THE CHALLENGE OF COMMITMENT AND OPENNESS

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Synopsis: This essay outlines both the necessity and the difficulty that Christians face in working out a theology of religions that will sustain an authentic dialogue with other religions. The necessity for such a dialogical theology is grounded on the need for all religions to move from “an age of monologue” to “an age of dialogue.” The complexity has to do with the requirement of all dialogue: to be both truly committed to one’s own religion and at the same time truly open to other religions. The author then outlines the four models in Christian theology for understanding other religions and shows how all of them, in one way or another, do not sufficiently foster both commitment and openness. The models are: 1) Replacement (Christianity is the only true religion, meant to replace all others.) 2) Fulfillment (Other religions are valuable but meant to be fulfilled in Christianity.) 3) Mutuality (No one religion is superior over all others; all are called to learn from each other.) 4) Acceptance (All religions are so different that they really cannot be compared; each will make absolute claims.) So the task of developing an adequate Christian theology of religions remains as a challenge to all Christians; such a theology must be worked out through dialogue with other Christians and with followers of other religions.

Over the past decades, for many Christians (I’m talking especially about western Christianity), there has been a slow but marked shift in the way Christians view the “them” in the title of this chapter. Especially in mainline churches, pastors are noting a change in the attitudes of their

congregations toward persons of **other** religions: the “alien others,” we might say, are becoming the “neighborly others.”

I. A SHIFT FROM ALIEN TO NEIGHBOR

Throughout most of church history, the “religious others” have been for Christians “the alien others.” Those who walked Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist, even Jewish, and especially Islamic, paths were generally felt to be strangers, often enemies, or competitors. They were aliens – feared, perhaps hated, always dangerous or suspicious. If there was any more positive Christian relationship with them, it was one of trying to convert them, for on their own paths, they were moving away from God, toward eternal damnation. So to help them, one had to convert them.

Especially since the second half of the past century, such attitudes, both pastorally and theologically, have been changing. The theological shift occurred explicitly in the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church (1962-65), but that was perhaps more an effect than a cause of what was already going on within the Christian communities.¹ Gradually, more and more Christians felt the need to get along with, respect, learn about, maybe even learn from Hindus and Buddhists and Muslims. What may have been the scowl Christians saw on the face of the religious other was turning to a smile. The question Christians began to feel was not “how do we get them into heaven?” but “how do we talk with them?”

Many factors contributed to this shift. Primarily, the world has become smaller. Not only do ideas move around more quickly and more clearly, so do people. We live in an age of greater, smoother communication, information, migration. What has been happening religiously within our world and communities was captured way back in the 60s by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a pioneer of interfaith exploration, when he observed that now we no longer just read about Hindus or Muslims, but “we drink coffee with them personally as well.” They live down the street, work in the same office, play with (maybe even marry!) our kids.²

Furthermore, centuries of missionary labors may have planted the Christian church on all the continents of the world, but these labors

have not changed the basic contours of the religious map of the world. Some theologians, therefore, are drawing the tentative but unsettling conclusion that the many religions of the world are not “a matter of fact” but a “matter of principle.” They just don’t **happen** to be there — as the result of the vagaries or aberrations of history; they’re **intended** to be there — intended by the one God of history. In some way, the religions are playing a role in what Christians call the history of salvation.³ God seems to love diversity, not only among plants and animals and peoples, but also among religions. If this is so, Christians have to figure out what is the role of these other religions. That’s a theological question. It’s a question that can be answered not only by consulting the Bible but also through knowing more about these religions. And one of the best ways to understand them is by talking with their followers. Dialogue becomes a theological requirement.

From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue

The necessity of interreligious dialogue becomes all the more pressing when we consider, and feel overwhelmed by, the state of our world. What I am trying to get at is best expressed in the well-known announcement of Hans Küng: There will be no peace among nations unless there is peace among religions. And there will be no peace among religions unless there is greater, more effective dialogue among them.⁴ What Küng is urging goes beyond tolerance between the religions. Certainly, there can be doubt that the religious communities need to tolerate each other — that is, respect each other, let each other be. But tolerance, as urgent as it is, is not enough. Religious people also have to talk with each other — and talk with each other in a way that will lead not only to greater understanding and respect, but also to cooperation. Küng is calling for an interreligious dialogue that will facilitate not only interreligious tolerance but interreligious action — not only the ability to live together but the ability to work together in order to change this world.

For Christians, as well as for other religious believers, dialogue is becoming an **ethical imperative**. Humanity today faces a broad, menacing array of ethical problems that threaten us all — and that therefore can be resolved only through the collaboration of all nations and cultures.

I'm talking about the violence of material poverty, the violence of economic injustice, the violence of some people taking advantage of other people on the basis of race or of gender, and especially the violence that touches everyone everywhere – the depletion and destruction of the life-sustaining ability of the eco-system. And looming over (or under) this list is the violence and warfare and terrorism that is justified and fortified in the name of religions. The analysis and resolution of such life-threatening ethical challenges cannot come piecemeal, from any **one** nation or culture; rather, they require shared concern and shared action among all peoples based on some kind of shared ethical values.

Thus, the growing discussion about the need for a **Global Ethic** – fundamental, shared values, principles, commitments that have to be elaborated by all peoples and cultures in order to be acted on by all peoples and cultures. Such a Global Ethic, if it is to be realized at all, will be the work of politicians, economists, political scientists, philosophers, grassroots organizations. But also, many are claiming, it must involve the work and contribution of religious communities. For great numbers of the world's population, the values that will ground a **Global Ethic and** the energy and resolve to actually live by it will come from their religious faith and traditions. So the religions of the world must make their contribution to the common ethical challenges facing humanity; and they must do so individually by looking into the treasures of their own tradition and collectively through dialogue and cooperation with other traditions.

So, though the phrasing may sound somewhat grandiose, we can say that Christians, as well as all religious persons, are today being called to move from an age of monologue to an age of dialogue. The “age of monologue” describes most of the religious history of humankind – the centuries when for the most part religions were born in their own cultural neighborhood and felt they could do perfectly well in staying there and talking only among themselves. Good fences made for good neighbors; when those fences weren't well maintained or well observed, problems resulted, even warfare. This age of monologue is, as I have suggested, starting to crumble, or at least be questioned, by many religious people and their leaders. Yes, religious fundamentalism is growing among various traditions; and a synonym for fundamentalist might well be

“monologuer.” But it is precisely this growth of fundamentalism, and the excesses of intolerance and violence it can lead to, that is becoming one of the strongest voices in the call for dialogue.

So whether it is because of the dangers of a fundamentalist exploitation of religion, or because our religious neighbors are moving closer to our neighborhood and we’re getting to know, even like, them, or because the kinds of problems facing our broader city or world require the cooperation of all the neighborhoods – for a variety of reasons Christians, with other believers, feel that the new millennium needs to be the threshold of a new age of dialogue. In an age of dialogue, one must be religious interreligiously. – And that brings us to the real challenge of interreligious dialogue.

The Challenge of Dialogue: Commitment and Openness

Real interreligious dialogue isn’t easy. And it can be dangerous. If we understand dialogue to be more than just chit-chat in which we talk mainly to be nice to each other, and more than just an exchange of information so that we can understand each other better – if dialogue is going to be a **real conversation** in which we both **talk and listen**, in which we both speak our mind and open our mind, in which we both try to persuade the other of the truth and value of what we believe and at the same time are ready to be so persuaded by what our partner holds to be true and valuable – then dialogue is going to make both difficult and risky demands. Dialogue is a complex movement of “both-and” – both speaking and listening, both teaching and learning, both clarity and questioning, both firmness and suppleness.

All these duets can be summarized in the polarity of **commitment and openness**. In a genuine religious dialogue (really, in any conversation where people speak out of different viewpoints) one has to be firm in what one believes, persuaded that what has been true and good for oneself might be the same for others; this enables one to have something to contribute to the dialogue. And yet, if the conversation is going to be two ways, if there are going to be “equal rights” for all the participants in the dialogue, then one has also to be open to listening to

and possibly learning from the commitments of the dialogue partner. And “learning from” can mean changing one’s mind and admitting mistakes.

For Christians, this means that we have to be fully committed to Christ and his Gospel and at the same time genuinely open to what God may be trying to tell us through other religions. But for most Christians, this is something new, maybe something bewildering or threatening. Just how does one balance such commitment to Christ and openness to others? Is it even possible? Wouldn’t it be something like asking a married person to be committed to one’s spouse and at the same time open to other potential spouses? For Christians in the dialogue, openness to other religions might lead them to lessen or even lose their own allegiance to Jesus and the Gospel.

Just because something is difficult or dangerous doesn’t mean that it does not remain necessary. And for many – a growing number it seems – dialogue with persons of other faiths, despite the complexities and risks, remains an ethical imperative. One might even say that one of the most urgent and daunting challenges (certainly not the only one) facing Christians as they step into the new millennium is how to carry on a dialogue with other religions that will, first of all, help all religions to work together in, as Küng puts it, “global responsibility” for the ethical challenges facing humankind; but it will also be a dialogue that enables Christians to better understand themselves and their own convictions in the light of so many other thriving religious faiths. Such a dialogue will require the complex balancing of commitment and openness. Can Christians do it?

Right now, it seems to me, we Christians don’t have the equipment to manage such a balancing of commitment and openness in an authentic religious dialogue. That is, we don’t have the theological tools. We are in a situation familiar throughout Church history where our **practice** (or the need for practice) has outstripped our **theory**.⁵ (That’s really the way Christian understanding or theology grows – by trying to accompany, help, or catch up with Christian living.) We don’t have the theological clarity and guidance for carrying out an interreligious dialogue that would balance commitment and openness. In the words of Jacques Dupuis, one of the most knowledgeable and careful Christian theologians of religions, such a dialogue-sustaining theology will require a “qualitative shift” in

the way Christians understand other religions.⁶ That shift has not yet happened. So a Christian theology of religions that is informed by and can support a Christian dialogue with religions is “a work in progress.” — A brief, hasty review of contemporary theologies of religions will, I think, indicate progress made and still needed.

II. CURRENT THEOLOGIES OF RELIGIONS DON'T MEET THE CHALLENGE OF COMMITMENT AND OPENNESS

Classifying is always risky. Fitting things into neat categories often means stuffing them (or leaving any misfits on the floor). Still, in an effort to bring some order into the array of current Christian attitudes toward other religions, let me offer a line-up of categories or models that, I think, cover most of the theological terrain. Most Christian theologians writing about other religions may move between these models, but each of them, I venture to say, spends more time in one than in the others.⁷ I'll try to give a thumbnail sketch of each and then comment on how well it balances the commitment and openness needed for dialogue.

The Replacement Model

For Christians who follow this model, the best way to relate to persons of other religious paths is to share the good news of Jesus with them and hope that this will bring them into the community of Jesus-followers. This attitude is found especially among the Fundamentalist and Evangelical churches, though much of its theology was laid out, powerfully and prophetically, by Karl Barth. For these Christians there are certain beliefs, given in God's revelation through Jesus, that are simply non-negotiable. Among these are the announcement to all the world that God has given hope and the possibility of well-being (salvation) through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Here and no where else. As stated so clearly in I Tim. 2: 4-5, God certainly does not discriminate in God's love and “desires everyone to be saved”; but this God offers this saving love “through the one Mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus.” This means that in other religions we may

find many worthwhile, even necessary, questions as to how humans can get their act together; but the real, effective, and only answer is given in the message and the person of Jesus. While Christians will always love persons of other religions and try to talk with them, they will show their love by attempting to replace their previous religious beliefs and practices with baptism into Christian life and practice.

Clearly, this model meets all the requirements of the commitment necessary for dialogue. But it evidently lags in openness. How can one be open to possibly learning from others when one already has the fullness of God's truth? How can one really cooperate with other religions in trying to solve the ethical, global issues of the day when one is convinced that the one and only solution has already been given in Jesus? Admittedly, Christians who hold to this Replacement Model see no need for dialogue and feel no uneasiness in announcing to Buddhists or Muslims that without embracing Jesus they cannot be saved.⁸ – But for those followers of Jesus who feel the imperative of dialogue, this model, though it offers a good example of commitment, doesn't work.

The Fulfillment Model

This model came into clear focus, especially for Catholics but also for Protestants, when the Second Vatican Council tried to lay the theological groundwork for a more positive attitude toward, and therefore a real dialogue with, members of other religions. For the first time, in formal, official statements of a Christian church, Christians publicly recognized that there is much that is “true and holy,” in other religions, that they contain “precious things both religious and human... elements of truth and grace,” that God is revealing, perhaps saving, through them, and that therefore Christians are “exhorted... prudently and lovingly... to dialogue and collaborate” with these religions.⁹ What, as it were, burst onto the Christian world in Vatican II has to a great extent been endorsed and developed and become a consensus among many members and theologians of the so-called mainline churches—that the God revealed by Jesus cannot be confined to the Christian churches.

But what, for this model, is the ultimate purpose of dialogue? The answer is determined by the same non-negotiable belief that guides

the replacement model – Jesus as the one and only savior. Though representatives of this fulfillment model allow the effects of Jesus’ death and resurrection to actually work outside the church, within and through other religions (cosmically or anonymously), they insist that it is only in Jesus that God’s gift of saving love is actually offered or **constituted**, and therefore only in Jesus is God’s truth fully, finally, unsurpassably revealed. The final end of dialogue, therefore, must be fulfillment. In Jesus and in his church, all the truth and value and beauty of other religions are to find their completion. As the Second Vatican Council put it: “Whatever goodness or truth is found among them [the religions], it is considered by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel.”¹⁰

With this model, how do commitment and openness balance out? Like the replacement model, this attitude weighs in heavily with commitment; at the same time, it provides possibilities of greater openness by strongly affirming the active presence of God in other religions. But is this openness sufficient to sustain a conversation in which **both** sides are really able not only to speak but to learn? If the value of Buddha is actually made possible by Jesus, if we Christians have the full and final Word of God, if therefore whatever truth might be found in Hinduism has to be already given in Christian revelation – how much can Christians really learn in the dialogue? How much can be added to what is already “full and final”?

The Mutuality Model

Spokespersons for this model try to make up for the deficiencies of openness that they find in the other models. For them, what is non-negotiable is still open to new interpretations. And so they press their case that the witness of the New Testament and Christian tradition can, in this age of pressing dialogue, be so understood that Christians can proclaim Jesus to be **truly** Savior of the world (that’s the non-negotiable), but not the **only** Savior of the world. In other words, the saving role of Jesus remains **universal** – that is, meant for all peoples not just for Christians; but this role is not **exhaustive** of what God is up to in the world. Therefore, just as Christians must continue to announce that Jesus and his message are **necessary** for humanity to understand and live what

God intends for creation, so might other religious figures or revelations be equally necessary. (They say **might**, for it is only through dialogue that they can find out.) This is not to say that therefore there are no differences between the religions, or that they are all essentially saying the same thing, or that every religious belief is equally valid or effective in revealing God's truth. The differences between the religions are real; they're often stark; and they matter. Differences constitute the stuff of dialogue.¹¹

Clearly, there is greater openness in this model. But has it just tipped the scales in the opposite direction? Openness seems to outweigh commitment. If many religious figures can have universally relevant and equally valid messages, then doesn't Jesus end up as "one of the boys," one of many saviors? Is this really consistent with all the New Testament language that attributes to Jesus a specialness not found elsewhere? Is it consistent with the belief, in the New Testament and throughout Christian history, that Jesus was "Son of God" in a way that differs from how we are all sons and daughters of God? And if God is saving in many ways, why should I choose one way over another? Why be a Christian rather than a Buddhist?

One can also ask advocates of the mutuality model whether they are as open to other religions as they think they are. If we really hold something to be true, if that truth colors our whole life, won't it also color what we see in other religions? Won't we always be viewing and understanding and evaluating the other religious person from the perspective of our own commitments? We will judge something to be true and good in another religion because it reflects or relates to our own truth and good. If it doesn't we'll judge it to be false or evil. How open is that, really?

The Acceptance Model

This model seeks to recognize and live with the complexity, even the well-nigh impossibility, of neatly balancing commitment and openness. Influenced by what is called postmodern consciousness (that's why this model is also termed a "post-liberal" perspective), its proponents accept the reality that we are all living in our own cultural worlds, that

the world we live in, like a pair of glasses, affects how we look at everything else, and that the many cultural-religious worlds that make up humanity are very, very different. In fact, they're so different that you really can't "measure" one from the perspective of the other; each world or religion is incommensurable with the others.¹² Some advocates of this model suggest that each religion has its own goal, or ultimate end, different from the others. The religions are seeking, not salvation, but salvations, each, as it were, going its own way to its own final destination, both in this world and in the next¹³ This means, more clearly and practically, that we all have our non-negotiables; we all have our absolutes or full and final truths, and you really can't judge one in the light of another. To try to do so will lead either to distorting the other so that it will fit yours, or reducing yours so it will make room for the other.

So this model calls upon Christians, and all religious persons, to simply **accept** the other religions. Let them be. Be good neighbors to each other, but stay in your own backyard. Yes, talk to each other as much as you can, but let it be over your backyard fences. And if there is going to be any kind of a dialogue in which the partners search for deeper truth or a solution to common problems, know that it will really be a conversation in which each participant, for the most part, will be making an "apology" for, or promoting, their own truth. Dialogue is, and should be, a kind of holy competition, in which everyone lays out their own non-negotiable truths as clearly and courteously as possible, in the hope that the deeper or higher truth will prevail.¹⁴

It seems that this acceptance model does achieve a neat balance of commitment and openness, recognizing that all religions make their own absolute or non-negotiable truth claims and urging them all to respect each other for doing that. But, one may ask, does this understanding of religious pluralism, even when it urges dialogue as apologetics, go anywhere? It appears that the religions are actually confined to their own backyards. Each is securely committed to its own truth. But maybe too securely. Does this model really allow for any kind of real challenge to religious truth from the outside? Also, while each religion is open to and accepts the differences and the absolute claims of other religions, does this acceptance really end up as tolerance rather than as a dialogue in which both sides are ready not only to defend but to criticize their own

positions? Can religions really search for truth and cooperation together when they are going in different directions, toward different “salvations”?

So where do we go from here? It seems that none of these models, by themselves, does the job of aiding Christians to achieve the convergence of commitment and openness necessary to respond to the **imperative of dialogue**. As I said, the theology of religions and dialogue is a work in progress. Christian theologians, from whatever “model,” need to keep talking with each other. And if they can do so using these two “hermeneutical flashlights” – searching for a theology of religions that would facilitate both commitment to Christ and openness to others – they can, I trust, achieve a theology that will make for a more satisfying Christian spirituality, a more effective dialogue with others, and a greater healing for our world.

ENDNOTES

¹See “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.”

²*The Faith of Other Men* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 11.

³Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), pp. 163, 167; Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), p. 11.

⁴Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), p. xv.

⁵I have tried to lay out this creative tension between practice and theory, especially for Roman Catholics, in: “Catholics and Other Religions: Bridging the Gap between Dialogue and Theology.” *Louvain Studies* 24 (1999) 319-354.

⁶Jacques Dupuis, “Christianity and Other Religions: From Confrontation to Encounter,” *The Tablet*, October, 2001, 1484-85 (See also, op.cit., 1520-21, 2001-02).

⁷I’ve tried to describe these models in a broader and balanced manner in *Introducing Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002).

⁸Well, not all of them. Recently, Evangelical theologians have been laboring to devise theological theories that would enable “pagans” who have not heard of Jesus to actually be saved – through special revelations at the moment of death or post-mortem, or through God’s “middle knowledge,” or “by exception” in anticipation of Jesus’ death. There have even been some Evangelical thinkers who would allow for God, in the divine “wider mercy,” to actually act and save through other traditions; such views would probably blend into the next model. See Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

⁹“Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.” # 2, “The Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity,” # 9; “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” # 92.

¹⁰“Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” # 16. For representatives of this Fulfillment Model, see Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology* (note 3). Gavin D’Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000). Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*.

¹¹Representatives of this Mutuality Model can be found in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986)

¹²Spokespersons for this Acceptance Model would include George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984); Joseph A. DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 1992).

¹³S.Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995); id. *The Depth of Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

¹⁴Paul Griffith, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991). See also William Placher, *An Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989).