

CHRISTIANITY AND PLURALISM

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I speak to you this morning as a Christian Theologian, who happens to be an ordained Presbyterian minister. This may seem to present a rather grim prospect, but in what follows I will address an issue which concerns us all—and in a way which may bring our different perspectives closer together.

Competing Forces in a “Postmodern” World:

We are said to live in a “Postmodern” world. By this is meant that, in the latter part of the twentieth century, we came to realize that many of the assumptions of “modernity” no longer apply to the way we think and live. Here “modernity” is defined as the period which began with the “Enlightenment” of the eighteenth century and extended through the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries. “Modern thought” on this view refers to popular understandings of science, society, morals and religion that developed during this period, and, to some extent, of course, continue to hold sway. For many contemporary thinkers, however, those assumptions have been replaced. For instance, a largely mechanical and predictive view of science has, by Einstein and others, been replaced by the theories of relativity and quantum mechanics, so that measurement is now relative and physical knowledge uncertain and indeterminate. What now counts for “knowledge” operates under a new paradigm, according to which what is “known” is established neither by verification or falsification, but our agreement as to what “works”. Social theory is no longer informed by metaphysical assumptions about “humanity” where “one size fits all”. In light of the discoveries of paleoanthropology, genetics, and even robotics, sociologists now view the question of what constitutes the “human” as quite open. Morality is no longer controlled by biblical teaching, or even over-arching idealistic or utilitarian philosophies, but is seen to be radically contextual.

Even if you agree with me that there is still a lot of “modernity” within our so-called “postmodern” age, we must admit that things have changed. What before seemed certain is no longer so; life no longer seems to conform to absolutes, and in fact presents diversities which resist all our efforts to control or unify them. Our situation is not only unsettling, but frightening. As William Butler Yeats put it:

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart, the center cannot hold...”

If the “modern” period could be characterized as “centripetal”, or “gravitational”, a period in which science, ethics and religion were governed by central truths, our present “postmodern” world appears controlled by opposite, centrifugal forces—where everything flies from any comfortable and dependable center. Where once we viewed science as controlled by certainty, society by unifying organization, morals by divine or natural law, and religion by a single perception of God, we now have (and are asked to embrace) uncertainty and a world of diversity. We live in a pluralistic age.

Of course, we also in many ways continue to live with the assumptions of modernity. While relativity and uncertainty are the hall marks of the new Physics, above the sub-atomic level we still depend upon (and believe in) the certainties provided by practical geometry and experimentation. We still believe that morality, while hard to pin down, has a universal application, and most still believe that there is one God who oversees the whole. Our time, therefore, is one in which we are faced with these competing forces—of centrifugal diversification and centripetal integration—of unity and diversity.

Religious Pluralism

The topic you have assigned to me involves the religious aspect of this situation—that is, religious pluralism, and I apologize for the lengthy introduction—but you know how professors are!) More than any other area of life, religion exhibits the struggle of forces we have just noted. As Paul Tillich showed, there is in every religious faith both the absolute and the relative, both the universal and the particular. Every experience of God, insofar as it is an experience of “God”, is an encounter with the absolute and the universal, and thus claims for itself absolute truth. But every experience of God, in so far as it is an “experience”, is also individual and therefore relative to the historical and social setting of that person. It is thus inevitable that there should be a plurality of religions—and, because every religion claims knowledge of the absolute, it is also inevitable that every faith resists (and to a certain extent competes with) the faith of the others.

One would like to say that eastern religions, especially Hinduism, are more tolerant because they better recognize this dual characteristic of religion—but the violence between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims makes one wonder. In any case, it is clear that the two great western faiths of Christianity and Islam have not recognized it. In the name of “absolute truth”, both religions have in various imperialist ways sought to convert others by denying any integrity to other faiths—and to do so, if necessary, by force. To illustrate this for Christianity, we need only recall the age of Constantine, the rise of Rome and its crusades, the persecution of deviants by both Protestant and Catholics during and after the Reformation, the wars of religion in the seventeenth century, and the suppression of dissent in the eighteenth. Moreover, we see the same tendency, not only in Islamic fundamentalism, but in the more violent forms of Christian fundamentalism.

If the Enlightenment brought with it religious tolerance, this had more to do with the idea of “the rights of man” than with tolerance for religious pluralism. In reaction to Catholic power, the French Revolution sought to deChristianize France—churches were closed, priests and ministers were arrested, and the cathedral of Notre Dame was renamed the “Temple of Reason”. Fashioned from the Deism of Voltaire and Rousseau, a new national religion arose which worshipped the “Supreme Being” and celebrated civic virtues. The trouble, of course, was that the divinity worshipped was but a reflection of French revolutionary ardor, which, under Robespierre, turned out to be quite murderous. A concurrent and more successful protest against ecclesiastical absolutism may be found in the Unitarian movement in England and America. While it expressed an anti-

Trinitarianism which was always present in the church, Unitarianism sought acceptance of other religions by avoiding the absolute exclusivity it believed necessarily accompanied the church's claims regarding Jesus Christ—and it was this motive that provided a basis for the eventual merging of Unitarians and Calvinist Universalists in New England.

There can be no doubt that this liberal, rational approach to religion has done much to encourage an acceptance of religious pluralism. Elsewhere, however, it did not always have that effect. In the 1920's, Germany, like revolutionary France, was in a state of chaos, and theologians attracted to the values of the Enlightenment sought to reinterpret Christianity in a way that would better serve the needs of the German people. The trouble was that those needs were also being met by Nazism, so that the "civic religion" inspired by those liberal theologians soon enough adopted anti-Semitism and the nationalist God of fascism.

The ancient philosopher Xenophanes once remarked that, "If donkeys had gods they would bray." Whether Unitarian or Christian, whether liberal or conservative, we all tend to paint a portrait of God colored by our own presuppositions and prejudices—and in so doing, we set up barriers between our own faith and that of others. We cannot, however, solve the problem of religious pluralism by neglecting the absolute (and thus the very "different") nature of God in favor of the relativities of human religious experience. The fact that our religious ideas are always subject to our cultural heritage does not mean that God is. When Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and even Unitarians forget this, then the God we worship becomes an idolatrous projection of our selves—and that idol can become as absolute and intolerant as any drawn from the pages of the Bible or the Koran.

Toward a Christian Pluralism:

More than that I cannot say about Unitarianism or any other form of faith. About Christianity, however, I can and must say more, for you are probably asking, "How can Christianity in any way be inclusive when it makes absolute claims about the God of the Old Testament and about Jesus? What about the words of Peter in the Book of Acts: "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved," or all those similar passages in the New Testament?"

Over the last half-century, something like a sea change has taken place in Christian thought. Under the influence of my teacher, the great theologian Karl Barth, Christian theologians tend now to view the whole of scripture as a very human witness employed in the self-disclosure of God—a God who not only claims, but is merciful to, all people. The God of the Old Testament is certainly the God of Israel, but he is also the God of all the nations. Moreover, Israel's religious understanding of this God does not exhaust the ways in which he might reveal himself, for we read in Isaiah:

"My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are my ways higher than your ways,

And my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Is 55:8,9)

But what about the New Testament? Here I must refer to the very thing Unitarians do not like, the doctrine of the Trinity. That doctrine does not (and never did) hold that there are three different people running around in the Godhead, nor that the Father, Son, and Spirit are “persons” in any ordinary sense. It means, rather, that God is revealed in three different ways—as creator, as savior, and as a spiritual presence, but because God is for us “personal”, and because the church believes he revealed himself through a “person”, those three ways of God’s being-for-us are spoken of (however awkwardly) as “person”. Thus, when the church speaks of the “Son” as the second, eternal way of God’s being, it does not refer directly to the man Jesus, but to the “Word” of God, that is, to the way in which God communicates his nature and gracious will to humankind. When the Old Testament prophets declared “the word of the Lord”, they had that aspect of God in mind. We find this same reference in the Gospel of John, when the writer says that, “In the beginning was the Word...and the Word was God.” John goes on then to say that the “Word became flesh and dwelt among us...”, and the church believes that this gracious way of communication was so joined to the man Jesus, that when we see him, we see it.

What does this mean for the question before us? In the first place, it means that those Reformed Universalists who united with the Unitarians had it right—and on this point Calvin had it wrong. There is no secret and eternal election by which God ahead of time separated the sheep from the goats. In Christ, we see the eternal and gracious Word of God for all. Thus, according to St. Paul, not only the Jews, but all people are seen as recipients of God’s covenant of grace. (R11)

But what about that New Testament teaching that there is “no other name” except “Jesus” by which men and women can receive God’s goodness? In the ancient world, there was not much concern for individuality and personality, indeed, we may say that the “self” as we understand it had not yet been invented. Back then, names tended to be functional, as matter of identifying relations or defining one’s role in life. The name of Jesus was not given for ordinary purposes of identification, and certainly not for the purpose of distinguishing him from other males, young or old. According to Matthew, it was neither Joseph nor Mary who named Jesus, but Gabriel, the messenger of God. He was named “Jesus” (which means, literally, “God saves”) because that is what God does, and where deity is seen in that way, Christians have reason to hope that there, in some sense, is belief “in his name”, that there, too, by whatever name, “the true light that”, as John put it, “enlightens every man [is] coming into the world.” (Jhn 1:9) We cannot forget that Jesus himself warned that saying his name “Lord, Lord”, was not enough and that he had “other sheep, not of this fold.”

Karl Barth was called a “Christocentric” theologian, for he taught that Christ reveals to us what God is and what we truly are. But he did not believe that the eternal Word of God was necessarily restricted to its revelation in Christ. There may well be “other lights” that reflect “the one great light” of which the Gospel of John speaks. And that means that, while Christians will certainly want to tell others about the light they see, they will not deny its presence among others. This is not, of course, understood by all Christians,

and we still hear preaching and see missionary work done on the basis of exclusivity. But among many Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists and Episcopalians, we find ministers and missionaries who tell their story of God's power and goodness without denying the validity of other religions who understand divinity in similar ways.

So, in conclusion, we may say that, when it is wise, the church does not address the plurality of religions by denying their authenticity, nor by reducing the reality of God to whatever projections of humanity particular persons or cultures may undertake. Rather, because it finds in Jesus the transcendent and eternal light of God, it can and must approach other faiths with the expectation that they, too, may reflect that same light—for, as there is darkness enough in the church itself, it holds to the words of John, who said that the Word “Was life, and the life was the light of men
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness
Has not overcome it.” (Jh 1:4,5)