

DENVER SEMINARY

PR664 – RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

AN APOLOGETIC THEOLOGY OF OTHER RELIGIONS

BY

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is a call for Christians to put work into developing a more adequate theology of other religions, one that is neither provincial nor passive. This must be a thoughtful theology of *understanding* and *intellectual engagement* that seeks to allow Christians to interact meaningfully with adherents of other religions with respect and humility.

THE NATURE OF RELIGION

We need to start with a basic understanding of the nature of religion. Religion, as defined by Winfried Corduan, “is a system of beliefs and practices that provides values to give life meaning and coherence by directing a person toward transcendence.”¹ This system is typically comprehensive in its scope, extends to the deepest convictions that a person holds about the world in which they find themselves, and makes certain ethical demands on the person.

James Sire defines a worldview as “a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic makeup of our world.”² In terms of worldview elements, religions make objective truth claims (which, for adherents, form the basis for their defining beliefs) about the nature of ultimate reality, the human condition, and spiritual liberation and destiny.³ As Sire mentions, these beliefs are presupposed, and thus form the doctrinal basis for the overall outlook of the person in their interactions with the world around them, including broader social practices and institutions that arise over time within the religion. Sacred literature, such as the Vedas, Bible, Qur’an and *Tae Tsang*, which may contain such diverse literary styles

¹ Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 21.

² James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, 3d ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 16.

³ However, we must be careful not to *reduce* religions to worldviews or ignore the fact that religions are culturally situated.

as “wisdom” writings and proverbs, religious narratives, poetry, prophecy, and apocalyptic usually provides the mythic grounding for the truths that are taught.⁴

Ethics is an important part of most religions. Believers are expected to live in certain ways and hold certain values so that they can be oriented rightly towards the sacred or holy spiritually, existentially, and socially. “This right orientation to the sacred or holy – meaning spiritual liberation or way of being – is viewed as necessarily connected to proper beliefs and practices.”⁵ Religious communities regulate the behavior of their members through the ethical standards that are supported by the religious beliefs of the community members.

Religions also have a social aspect, since “in all ages and for most cultures, religion has been the glue that has held a society together.”⁶ The social practices – both ritual and mystical - and institutions that form a key part of religion provide a significant normative social structure in which members of religious communities can find a place where they belong and can contribute to the fabric of the community.

It should be pointed out, even for religions that embrace a broad inclusivism (such as Hinduism or Buddhism) or religious pluralism (such as that of John Hick) that objective, universal truth claims are still being made about the nature of things. Whether it is Hick’s truth claim about the transcendent phenomenon of “the Real” as being what underlies all religious practice and experience, the Hindu notions of *karma* and transmigration, or the Buddhist beliefs in rebirth and nirvana: all of these are truth claims about the real state of affairs that informs

⁴ “Mythic” in the sense of playing an important role in forming and informing beliefs, which does not necessarily relate to the truth or falsehood of what the story affirms relative to human history.

⁵ Douglas Groothuis, *Religious Pluralism* (class lecture, Denver Seminary, 28th August 2008).

⁶ Michael Nazir-Ali, *The Unique and Universal Christ: Jesus in a Pluralistic World* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 85.

subsequent religious activity and secondary beliefs. As another example, even though many Buddhists may be very inclusive of other religious beliefs, they still will deny the authority of the Hindu Scriptures, the Vedas and Upanishads, and the existence of individual souls which transmigrate in the cycle of rebirths.⁷ Therefore, the radical exclusivism of religions such as Islam and Christianity may be an unpopular view in our postmodern, relativistic society today, but it is neither morally questionable nor inappropriate.⁸

Since religions operate at the level of a worldview, they are *all* exclusive to a certain extent because they claim to know (with varying levels of justification) that their view of reality is the most accurate. Therefore, we should be wary of attempts to brand Islam, Christianity and other “exclusive” religions as narrow-minded and intolerant because they make exclusive claims about the way things are.⁹ Christianity affirms that Jesus is the unique and universal Son of God while Islam says he is nothing more than one of many human prophets. Some Hindus would likely affirm Jesus as merely another sage or perhaps an *avatar* of Krishna, and Buddhist might label him as another teacher. These assertions, if they are to have any meaning at all, cannot all be true.

“Pluralism seeks to censure all truth claims as imperialistic, dogmatic, and divisive” but embracing that position means that we are not being fair to what religions really claim and allowing them “to be ensnared in the swamp of religious pluralism, which concludes that we are all saying the same thing.”¹⁰ If we affirm all truth claims as either true or irrelevant then the

⁷ Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1991), 57.

⁸ “Exclusive” in the sense that they make truth claims that are universal, binding and normative on all other people regardless of their religion.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 278.

¹⁰ Timothy C. Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 240.

“only remaining arbiter for truth is the sole perspective of an autonomous, vacillating individual,” but “to say that any person’s view of truth, if sincerely held, is equally valid is ludicrous, because it would mean the end of all moral discrimination.”¹¹ Religious dialogue becomes a waste of breath, since according to the postmodernist we are all saying essentially “the same thing”, and ethical judgments become relative and therefore ultimately arbitrary.

Tolerance in religion therefore does not mean that every religious belief should be regarded as equally true (as affirmed by postmodern relativism and religious pluralism) or equally meaningless (as proposed by logical positivism and secular humanism), but that we should accept and affirm the right of others to hold beliefs different from our own and to their right to attempt to persuade us – with sensitivity and respect - of the truth of their beliefs.¹² “*One can consider the beliefs of another to be false and yet treat that person with dignity and respect.* For to deny this is to suggest that we can only respect and treat properly those with whom we happen to agree. But surely this is nonsense!”¹³ We should acknowledge and denounce our human history of insensitivity and disrespect in interreligious dialogue and other forms of religion-based interaction, but strive to rise above our mistakes of the past and pursue a higher way.

We must not view genuine interreligious dialogue and persuasive witness to religious “others” as mutually exclusive. “The mutuality of dialogue is not sacrificed if everyone is permitted to speak with persuasion” since the real issue is *not* the strength of conviction in the witness to the truth of one’s position or beliefs, but whether that witness *is conveyed with proper*

¹¹ Ibid., 242.

¹² Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 308.

¹³ Ibid., 308. Emphasis mine.

humility and sensitivity rather than coercively, dishonestly or in a manipulative manner.¹⁴ Therefore, a theology of religions should be “*apologetic*” not in the sense of saying that religious believers should be embarrassed or ashamed of their religious beliefs, but rather in the sense that it recognizes the importance and rightful place of persuasion and engagement with people of other religious beliefs and convictions. To do anything less is to misunderstand the nature of religion and caricature the religious beliefs of others in unfair ways. Thus Christians can legitimately affirm an *engaged* exclusivism that affirms the universal right of all persons to engage others in religious dialogue in an appropriate manner with the goal of converting them.¹⁵

THEOLOGY AND REDEMPTIVE HISTORY

As David Wells helpfully points out, theology may be thought of as consisting of three major elements: “confession, reflection upon this confession, and cultivation of a set of virtues grounded in confession and reflection”¹⁶ As Christians, we start with what the church believes (“confession”) and then seek to reflect on how to bring God’s revelation to bear on the questions which arise as part of living in our world (“reflection”). And when we think about theology as product, and not just the process of theologizing, we must take into account the need for the resulting theology to be consistent, coherent and as comprehensive as possible. But it cannot end there since, in the case of a theology of religions, such confession and reflection must naturally lead to moral development and a sincere love for adherents of other religious traditions. This is why it must be an *apologetic* theology of religions; it must lead to humble, conscious, intentional

¹⁴ Tennent, 240.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 25-27.

¹⁶ David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 97-103; quoted in Harold A. Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 311.

engagement with others in constructive dialog and personal evangelism with the goal of conversion and long-term discipleship in the way of Jesus.¹⁷

Developing an adequate theology of religions involves more than comparative religion since it must attempt to give an adequate and accurate account for the religious dimension of human experience in all its rich diversity and history from the unique perspective of confessional, historical Christian orthodoxy rather than some kind of idealistic (yet impossible) objective “view from nowhere.”¹⁸ And because a theology of religions should be approached from a confessional starting point, it is appropriate to ask about the nature of revelation and how that informs our understanding of the phenomena other religions.

Christian theology recognizes that God has revealed himself to humanity in two major ways. Firstly, he is revealed to us through creation in the form of general revelation. Romans chapters one and two teach that no one is ignorant of God’s existence, power and moral nature since these things are revealed to us through the creation order, including our own moral nature.¹⁹ Also, God has revealed himself in special revelation both in Scripture and definitively in Jesus Christ.²⁰ Therefore, it is important that we frame any apologetic theology of religions with God’s gracious self-revelation to us in human history.

To do this we can start with the overall biblical framework of creation, fall, and redemption. Scripture teaches us that God created everything – including humanity – good and

¹⁷ Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 282.

¹⁸ Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 312.

¹⁹ Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 294.

²⁰ 2 Timothy 3 :16-17; John 1:1-18; Hebrews 1:1-3.

thus in a right relationship with himself.²¹ At that point God was able to walk and to converse openly with his image-bearers and there was no relational or ethical conflict with God.²² In Eden, in the beginning, all religion at that point was pure, right and true as God intended.

However, this situation was changed for the worse by our first parents' rebellion against God and the subsequent corruption of creation that resulted from this introduction of sin.²³ From that time on, humans have felt the tension of being both drawn to their creator as the source of their life and meaning, and repelled by his holiness because we are sinful creatures.²⁴ But, thankfully, God made a way for us to be brought back into right relationship with him and to have a true knowledge of him. Through the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has made a way for us – and, in fact, all of creation - to be reconciled to him.²⁵ At the center of history is the resurrection of Christ, which validated everything that he claimed about himself and his saving work and opened the way to new life to his followers.²⁶ As Neil Plantinga succinctly states, “proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus isn’t nearly everything Christians have to offer the world, but it’s the platform for everything they have to offer.”²⁷

This objective way of salvation through Christ is available to all and subjectively appropriated by faith in Christ.²⁸ Our redemption is something that God has provided on our behalf, but we must respond to his call and participate in his life through submission to his

²¹ Genesis 1:25-31.

²² Genesis 2.

²³ Genesis 3; Mark 7:20-23; Romans 3.

²⁴ Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 335.

²⁵ Genesis 3:15; John 3:16-18; 14:6; Mt. 11:27; Acts 4:12; 1 Tim. 2:5; Colossians 1:19-23.

²⁶ Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 1:4; 1 Corinthians 15:1-19.

²⁷ Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 80.

²⁸ Romans 10: 9-12; Ephesians 2:8-9.

lordship and obedience to the teachings of Christ.²⁹ We are duty bound to seek to tell others about this message of the wonderful hope available in Christ as Lord and Savior.³⁰ This mission is not optional for Christians because it involves participating, through the power of the Holy Spirit and authority of Christ, in the mission of God the Father to bless all nations and peoples.³¹

What this means for an apologetic theology of religions, among other things, is that Christians can account for both the universal desire for transcendence in human experience and history and all its variety and contradictions. We seek God because we are made in his image and are incomplete without a true relationship with our maker. We long for our creator because of our innate spiritual awareness through his placement of “eternity in our hearts”, whether we recognize it or not.³² As Augustine said, “You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”³³ Thus “we should not be surprised to find elements of truth and value in all religions” and “can think of the religions as displaying, in varying degrees, a rudimentary awareness of God’s reality through creation and general revelation.”³⁴

There is notable common ground between Christianity and the other religions in doctrine, ethics and practice. Christians should affirm this common ground (since *all* truth is God’s truth) and recognize it as a work of God’s common grace (“common” in the sense that it is at work in all people and at all times) and as a result of the *imago dei* and part of general revelation.³⁵ We

²⁹ Matthew 7:21-27; Philippians 2:5-16.

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 9:16.

³¹ Genesis 12:1-3; Acts 1:8; Romans 4:16-25.

³² Ecclesiastes 3:11.

³³ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.

³⁴ Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 333.

³⁵ Arthur F. Holmes, *All Truth is God’s Truth* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983).

should use rational means as a means of proclaiming to others, and reasoning with others, for the truth of the Christian worldview in a manner that is respectful and humble.³⁶

At the same time, we should not minimize differences in beliefs with other religions. For example, Muslims and Christians alike affirm belief in one God (i.e. monotheism). But what is meant by the term “God” in each religion is radically different. In Islam, God is the utterly transcendent, ultimately unknowable and incomprehensible creator. The Muslim God is a sovereign master seeking obedient slaves to his revealed will, not a loving father seeking to be reconciled to his lost children and fallen creation.³⁷ Also, the God of Islam is one person only. This is very clear in the Surah of Unity (or Oneness), Surah 112, which declares:

*He is God alone, God the Eternal [undivided].
He does not beget and he is not begotten.
There is none co-equal with Him.*³⁸

The Muslim God has neither extension in personhood nor the possibility of incarnation; rather “his coming to persons is His omnipresence in them and with them at every time and in every place.”³⁹

Scripture affirms that our seeking is corrupted by sin, and therefore other religions are “expressions of a genuine, although misguided, search and longing for God.”⁴⁰ Religion and religious practices are as a means for hiding from God as the source of all illumination and

³⁶ 2 Corinthians 10:3-5; 1 Peter 3:15-16

³⁷ Mark A. Gabriel, *Jesus and Muhammad: Profound Differences and Surprising Similarities* (Lake Mary: Frontline, 2004), 165; Saal, 42; Matthew 6:1-18; Ephesians 1:3-14.

³⁸ Cragg, Kenneth, *The Call of the Minaret*, 3d ed (Boston: OneWorld Publications, 2000), 33.

³⁹ . Kateregga and David W. Shenk, *A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1997),, 10.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 334.

inspiration, because we are rebels and sinners.⁴¹ “It is often our religiosity (even “Christian” religiosity) – our attempts to impress God or to earn his favor through following carefully prescribed religious rituals and rules – that keeps us furthest from him.”⁴² Jesus reserved his harshest criticism for those who used religion as a cloak for avoiding the rightful claims of God on their lives.⁴³

Scripture consistently condemns as idolatry, and in does so in no uncertain terms, the worship of deities other than the God of the Bible and participation in the rites of any other religious traditions.⁴⁴ As Nazir-Ali points out, “behind the critique of idolatry lies the profound concern of the biblical writers that the creation, whether in terms of its beauty, power or fruitfulness, should not be mistaken for the one who has brought it into being, sustains it at every moment and is fulfilling his purposes of judgement [sic] and salvation for it.”⁴⁵ Thus any attempt by people to blur the distinction between the Creator and creation is condemned as idolatrous and sinful. And, despite the best intentions, encouraging Christians to participate actively in the prayer practices and worship services of other religions is not an acceptable option.⁴⁶

THE ROLE OF JESUS CHRIST

The Bible not only condemns idolatry, but also makes many exclusive statements about Jesus Christ. Christianity not only asserts that God is one in his nature, omnipresent and the all-powerful creator, but also that God is *triune* with respect to personhood: God the Father, God the

⁴¹ Nazir-Ali, 103.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 335.

⁴³ Matthew 6:1-18; 23:1-36.

⁴⁴ Exodus 20:2-5; Deuteronomy 7:1-6, 25-26; Psalm 115; Isaiah 41:21-24; 44:9-20; Acts 14:15; 17:16, 23-24, 29; 1 Corinthians 8:4-6.

⁴⁵ Nazir-Ali, 88.

⁴⁶ See an example of this recommendation in Jacques Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 236-252.

Son and God the Holy Spirit are one in eternal essence, yet three distinct persons.⁴⁷ At the heart of Christian doctrine is the notion that God “can *communicate himself* as well as his will to human beings made in his image” and that he has done so through the God-man Jesus Christ.⁴⁸ The fullest revelation of God came to humanity when the Son of God took on a human nature and became incarnate as a man.⁴⁹

Much of the New Testament witness to these historical assertions about Christ’s life, teachings (including his resurrection) can be attributed to first-hand witnesses and dated within the first century AD.⁵⁰ They are supported by Josephus, Tacitus and other contemporary historical sources. However, as seen from Surah 112 above, the Qur’an explicitly denies both the deity of Christ and the Trinity, yet makes these (and other) historical claims about the life and teachings of Christ more than 500 years after the events actually occurred.

Muslims hold that the true text of the Bible prophesies the coming of Muhammad (Surah 26:196), but that it has either been misinterpreted or corrupted by Jews and Christians to hide these prophecies (Surah 5:13).⁵¹ For example, Muslims assert that Jesus’ promise to send “another Counselor” in John 14:16 really refers to Muhammad rather than the Holy Spirit. But John 14:25 explicitly names the Counselor as the Holy Spirit, Acts 1:4-5 and 2:1-4 tie the events of the Day of Pentecost to this outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and for John 14:16 there are no variant readings – nor any other evidence – for this supposed corruption of the text in any of the

⁴⁷ Genesis 1:1, Deuteronomy 6:4; Psalm 139; Matthew 28:18-20; John 1:1-14, 18; Acts 5:3-4.

⁴⁸ Timothy George, *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 61.

⁴⁹ Romans 1:3; Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 2:15-17; Hebrews 1:1-3.

⁵⁰ Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987); William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1984), 255-298.

⁵¹ Gabriel, 224-5.

more than 5000 extant manuscripts of the New Testament today.⁵² In fact, as mentioned previously, there is abundant evidence for the historicity and textual integrity – and therefore trustworthiness – of not only the New Testament assertions about Christ, but also the entire Bible.⁵³

CONCLUSION

Why is it important for Christians to develop an engaged theology of religions? An apologetic theology of religions matters because people matter. For Christians such a theology has a personal aspect because it directly impacts how we relate to our friends, coworkers and neighbors as adherents of other religious faiths. It has an important social aspect, because it affects not only how we understand the place of respectful tolerance and dialogue, but also the rightful place of religion in government and other social institutions in a religiously diverse society.

If Jesus Christ really is the universal and unique incarnation of God, then this makes the truth claims of the Christian worldview normative for every person regardless of their religion.⁵⁴ The implications of the cross are universal and “nothing is untouched by it and all are brought to judgement [sic] under it but also salvation through it if they respond with faith and love.”⁵⁵ Not only can Christians account well for the phenomena of human religious diversity, but at the same time we can and *should* humbly and boldly proclaim the binding truth of Christianity to all people no matter what their faith.

⁵² George, 34.

⁵³ Gabriel, 224-229; Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 207-226; William J. Saal, *Reaching Muslims for Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 83-101.

⁵⁴ Stanley Grenz, “The Universality of the “Jesus-Story,” in *No Other Gods Before Me? Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions*, ed. John Stackhouse Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 110.

⁵⁵ Nazir-Ali, 59.