



THE
LUTHERAN
WORLD
FEDERATION

Loving your neighbor

Encouraging constructive interfaith engagement
– A Reader



Loving your neighbor

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Cover photo: Participants in an interfaith training workshop for youth in Medan, jointly organized by the LWF and the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies.

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Preface

Most churches today live in multi-faith contexts. Societies traditionally perceived as homogenous increasingly find themselves becoming a mix of faith and non-faith traditions. Different understandings and faith traditions have gained new contexts either in close or far away geographical settings, especially in a time when more than 70 million people around the world are forcibly displaced.

On the other hand, people have always been moving, and as new faith traditions find a home in new contexts, the search for cooperation and peaceful co-existence becomes inevitable. This is why interfaith engagement and peace building have been important for The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) for a long time. The focus is even more urgent for the communion of churches in view of the massive movement of people from their homes because of conflict, disaster and climate change.

The late Krister Stendahl, Lutheran bishop of the diocese of Stockholm, Sweden, and dean of Harvard Divinity School, formulated three guiding principles for interfaith encounters, which I paraphrase below:

- Let the Other define him/herself. It is very often that we are influenced by prejudices and what we think the other is.
- Do not compare the best in your own tradition with the worst in the Other's tradition. It is always important to be aware of what we compare
- Find something with the Other that you really envy. No tradition has the fullness; all traditions have something to contribute.¹

These guiding principles are both simple and useful. Different constructive tools are needed in our search for peaceful communities where people of different faiths can enrich each other.

In our shared global home, we have to search for the common good of humanity. While some are building walls that separate people, this will not work in the long run. As human beings, we are mutually interdependent. When one part suffers, all suffer. Therefore, as Christians, we need to see the image of God in every person. People of faith and non-faith can recognize each other's human dignity. Sometimes it is easy. Sometimes it brings many challenges.

The Lutheran tradition emphasizes the search for dialogue, understanding, and common responsibility in this world. *Loving your neighbor – Encouraging constructive interfaith engagement – A Reader* shares insights from previous years. Nevertheless, the work does not stop now. These are imperatives for ongoing reflection and interfaith praxis.

¹ "Introduction", *Offerings of Interfaith Dialogue* (Massachusetts: Harvard College, 2012), 5.

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Through its Department for Theology, Mission and Justice, the LWF is committed to continue supporting the member churches in their life and witness in multi-faith contexts. There is no one model or straightforward answer to the many emerging questions. It remains an open invitation for us to see each other as neighbors, as we encounter, get to know and understand each other.

Eva Christina Nilsson

Director, Department for Theology, Mission and Justice

Introduction

Sivin Kit

We believe that, in our troubled world, religion and religious organizations can be an active force for peace, justice, and reconciliation — a source of solutions rather than a source of conflict.¹

The first week of February in 2020 marks the 10th anniversary of the World Interfaith Harmony Week. The United Nations proclaimed the annual event as a way to promote harmony between all people regardless of their faith. The LWF declared its support toward this initiative in 2011, when the Council called upon all the member churches to join in observing the event. Since then, various churches have participated in local and regional activities that highlight common values shared by humanity, importance of interreligious dialogue and mutual understanding.

At regional level, gatherings such as the 2019 Asia Church Leadership Conference highlighted how much interfaith and peace are closely related to each other. The Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa, or PROCMURA, recently celebrated the 60th anniversary of its work, which continues to have significant impact in many countries on the continent. In the global north, the initiative named “A World of Neighbors”, recently initiated by the Church of Sweden, seeks to connect interfaith praxis with people on the move in a social-political climate where voices of inhospitality are becoming increasingly loud.

However, in spite of the significant contributions mentioned above and many others around the world, at times interfaith matters appear to be marginal or only mentioned in a reactionary manner — because we are forced to confront the new visibility or influence of other, religious communities (usually perceived as a problematic issue). Although there has been much theological debate in the field of interreligious dialogue, more could still be done to ensure the dialogue of theological exchange and the dialogue of life, as well as collaborative action, do not remain isolated from each other. Dialogue and diapraxis with people of other faiths mutually strengthen the participants in their own faith convictions.

The World Interfaith Harmony Week anniversary is an opportunity to revisit our past reflections on interfaith relations and offer constructive ways forward. After reviewing the theological trajectories of study processes on interfaith relations in the Lutheran communion, Simone Sinn reminds us of the following:

There is a temptation to fortify religion by immunizing it against inward and outward challenges. These attempts to protect religion may inadvertently turn into ideologizing

¹ “Lutheran World Federation Endorsement of World Interfaith Harmony Week”, *Letter to His Majesty King Abdullah II Ibn Al Hussein, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan*, 11 July 2011.

it. In order for religious plurality not to turn into destructive conflicts, interreligious encounter and engagement is needed, as well as theological critique.²

The purpose of this reader is to retrieve insights from study processes in the Lutheran communion. The articles are chosen to highlight themes and thinking to stimulate fresh engagement that can guard Christians from any attempt to ‘immunize’ ourselves “against inward and outward challenges.”

The reader provides a historical and geographical sampling around various topics from the 1980s until the end of the 2010s. At least two articles from each decade invite us to learn from the past with attention to the intercultural perspectives of the global north and south. There are important contributions from a gender perspective especially in the 2000s, and on the delicate question of Anti-Judaism and Christian Zionism. It is important to note that the articles represent the author’s views at the time they were written, which may have developed since. Therefore, their respective intellectual trajectory is beyond the scope of this collection.

Since the articles were produced within specific study processes and consultations for which LWF Studies or Documentation publications were produced, links are provided in the *Bibliography* section for further reading. While *Loving your neighbor – Encouraging constructive interfaith engagement* may not provide a comprehensive and detailed critical treatment of interfaith relations, it serves as an invitation to probe deeper into the vast reservoir of wisdom and debate from the last three decades of LWF’s theological journey.

The opening article by Paul Rajashekar frames key considerations for interfaith engagement that are still relevant today. His discussion on “theology of religions” captures the question around how Christians view other religions:

While it is clear that a commitment to one’s own confessional beliefs is a prerequisite for a genuine interreligious dialogue, does this necessarily imply that the theology of religion we want to forge can be done without any engagement with people of other faiths?

He further unpacks questions that address how the presence of other religious communities should be seen not as a threat but rather “a reality with positive meaning that we must seek to discover.” He draws on a cross-reference theological method to raise awareness about similar impulses in other religious teaching. Yet, differences are not ignored, downplayed or dismissed.

This approach is demonstrated in the second article by Olaf Schumann when he discusses key theological issues that hinder a fruitful Christian-Muslim conversation. He looks at the origins of Muslim understandings (or misunderstandings) of Christians; the presentation of Christ in the Qur’an as well as to what extent Muhammad demonstrates a prophetic role in history that might be appreciated in Christian terms. Christian-Muslim debate has long been plagued by high rhetoric at best and at worst polemics that have had tragic political implications. In one segment, Schumann models the kind of fruitful dialogue that might emerge:

² Simone Sinn, “Lutheran perspectives on interfaith relations: Theological trajectories of study processes in the Lutheran communion”, *Dialog* 2019: 7.

Christians may now ask the Muslims whether, if the Islamic understanding of the Kingdom of God is correct, it is also a Kingdom in which rule is identical with service, where power is identical with love? Does the Islamic Kingdom exclude worldly power and restrict itself to service, seeing the mixture with world power as an unholy temptation?

In the third paper, Reinhart Hummel shows a nuanced vision of Europe in the 1990s. Interestingly, much of what he highlights anticipates what currently dominates some discussions in Europe, albeit tied closer to concerns over people on the move. Hummel, like Hans Ucko, writing in the next article, suggests that this internal dialogue seems to be buried underneath the politically charged rhetoric in the media today over religion — particularly Islam. He sees a connection between a common ethic from other religions with the idea of “God’s activity in Creation and the world, in which he shows himself to be Creator, Lord and Sustainer of the world,” followed by the next step where “one can build a bridge to Lutheran positions which assign religions to the sphere of the Law.”

Ucko continues the conversation emphasizing how the first article of the Creed might offer fruitful ways forward in building bridges with people of other faiths:

In our Christological pilgrimage we need to go back to the marginal Jew, Jesus, to learn about his way to God. We have to go back to the First Article to leave room for God in our theology of other religions. We have to realize that we don’t have one Christology but several already in the New Testament. We have to see which of these is more compatible with a theocentric theology and possible in a world of many faiths.

Two voices from the global south keep us focused on the centrality of Christ in the next two articles. This is most evident when the mission of the church is uplifted in the debate. Moreover, the cultural conditions in which we live affect how we articulate the meaning of Christ for us in the wider world. Israel Selvanayagam captures this struggle in the following:

Christ, Lord and Savior were titles ascribed to Jesus after his resurrection. These titles had direct appeal to the Jewish-Roman-Greek context. Repeating them in other contexts, without proper explanation, does not convey the meaning of Jesus and the gospel. Following is an attempt at clarification. Jesus as the Messiah did not fulfill all the Jewish expectations. He might still meet people’s expectations in unexpected ways. And by perceiving Christ as a cosmic principle operating both before and after Jesus, Paul and other apostles provided the space for recognizing this principle in different ways in different cultures.

Selvanayagam’s respondent, Péri Rasolondraibe, questions how we understand the relation between the message and the messiah: the Gospel and the Christ, and wonders:

If Christians can separate the gospel from the person of Jesus Christ without reducing it to the level of concepts and ideologies about God’s reign. Is the gospel not anchored in the “news” that God, in Jesus, has shared divine life with what is not God and thus has brought what was created to share in God’s eternity?

While starting with common ground based on God the creator and ethics is often a necessary starting point, for many in the Lutheran communion, reclaiming the true meaning of 'evangelical', namely as it's related to the good news of Jesus Christ, is even more urgent in today's world where the word has morphed from its original meaning.

The relationship between Lutherans and Jews is particularly difficult because of anti-semitism that led to the Holocaust. Luther's harsh texts against the Jews are well known (although perhaps not well understood). Regardless of the historical debates, Wolfgang Kraus in his paper delves directly into the New Testament texts. He patiently guides readers through interpretation of difficult texts without a drift into Anti-Judaism. Hard exegetical labor is needed so that these texts cannot be misused easily and the author warns us to handle biblical texts with care, knowing there are implications, which go against the core of our faith to love our neighbor. The questions he seeks to address force Christians to pause for deep introspection:

How could a religion, which considers the command of love for God and one's neighbor to be central, contribute to fanning hatred and persecution of Jews in the name of Jesus? How could the cross, as the sign of reconciliation, become a sign of bitter persecution? Where are the roots to be found?

One might wonder why Monica Melanchthon's biblical introduction to the meaning of 'spirits' is included in a reader dedicated to interfaith relations. Besides showing how biblical resources can inform our thinking, her contribution invites those engaged in interfaith dialogue to consider the non-Abrahamic religions or world religions and take into account how Christians might reflect on what is significant for tribal and indigenous cultures. Additionally, in popular culture the notion of 'spirit' is not totally absent in secular societies. The rise of Charismatic and Pentecostal movements also has forced Lutherans to also revisit how we may respond to spiritual phenomena. The reality of such experiences and how people interpret encounters that have deep impact is not dismissed prematurely as Melanchthon guides the reader through her paper.

Admittedly, feminist approaches to religious plurality are unfamiliar to many, as in other major religious debates. At times, one might consider anything remotely related to the words 'Feminist', 'Gender', 'Woman' to be marginal and not mainstream. Helene Egnell invites us to see the value of voices from the margins. For her, 'Change', 'otherness' and 'difference' is what a genuinely feminist approach brings to the table, rather than a mere surface emphasis on women's perspectives. She raises an interesting question that is worth considering:

Whether we can really talk of a center and a margin — are there not where different power structures are in place, and diverse places at the margins? ... Can you choose a place at the margins and at the same time claim a place at the center?

A feminist approach, according to Egnell, merely names how 'reality is complex' and how 'different power structures intersect'. Her article provides much food for thought on how to transcend different cultures.

Overall, classic Lutheran teaching on a theology of the cross has a place and a function in interfaith relations and formal interreligious dialogue. Nottó R. Thelle brings us to the classical distinction between ‘Creation’ and ‘Salvation’, giving us a glimpse of how the LWF study processes provided a platform for his own thinking:

From 1986 onward I was involved in the LWF study project on interfaith issues participating at a number of international conferences. The first meeting was held in Geneva in 1986, where the theme was religious pluralism with special regard to the Lutheran heritage. The concern was not only to motivate and prepare Lutheran theologians and church leaders to involve themselves in dialogue and to deal seriously with pluralism. A major theme or sub-theme was to search for specific Lutheran contributions to interfaith dialogue. Can we offer insights that are unique to our tradition?

Munther Isaac addresses a relevant topic of Christian Zionism that provides an important balance to the earlier New Testament theological reflection on Anti-Judaism by Kraus. Both represent important strands of thinking within which the LWF has invited deeper engagement. Isaac’s point of departure is not merely a historical interest; he situates his article in response to lived reality from the impact of “right wing Israeli religious and nationalistic groups” as well as “Christian Zionism”. For Isaac,

These two groups are politically aligned, today, and are similar in the way they use the Bible, and in their “orientalist” perspective regarding Arabs, Muslims and oriental Christians. Both ideologies represent a classic case where religion, ethnicity and nationality are joined to form an ideology of exclusion and power.

Although differing in focus, Isaac shares with Kraus the concern on how scriptural texts are interpreted and how the Bible is used to understand the notion of “chosenness” or “election” that has political implications.

Loving your neighbor – Encouraging constructive interfaith engagement ends with a speech that LWF General Secretary Martin Junge gave at a Sant’Egidio gathering in 2019, under the theme “Peace without Borders: Religions and Cultures in Dialogue”. He highlights the dangers of hate speech and the importance of words spoken in the public sphere:

The defining feature of faith communities is ‘faith’ and not ‘fear’ – and surely not as a people who promote any form of phobia that dehumanizes the ‘Other’, our fellow citizens and neighbors.

While the focus of this reader is primarily interfaith engagement and interreligious relations, clearly the notion of peace is never far away. Similarly to the notion of dialogue — which we often only talk about when compelled by external circumstances. ‘Peace’ also emerges in the context of ‘countering violent extremism’ rather than ‘preventing violent extremism’. Religion is seen as something that is instrumentalized by economic, social, and political forces, yet in recent years, there has been a growing recognition that religious leaders can be agents of peace and reconciliation.

Looking forward

During the 2019 Global Refugee Forum, the LWF and Islamic Relief Worldwide jointly pledged to organize an international conference of faith actors in refugee response, aimed at building more inclusive societies. Additionally, through a joint project of the World Council of Churches and the Pontificate Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, the LWF participated in deliberations on “Serving a Wounded Humanity: Towards Interreligious Solidarity”. In both initiatives, religious leaders, academicians, and grassroots practitioners all share a commitment to ensure that theological and ethical reflection are not separated from experiences and praxis on the ground.

A quick glance through the articles in this reader shows how the issues raised and insights offered remain relevant to current debates. While some specific details might appear dated, the discussions often sound similar, even if they have taken on a different tone. In fact, now more than ever before, all religious communities need to intentionally and honestly review the quality of religious practice in daily life against the grand claims that religious figures make about the virtues of religion.

The issue of how scripture is interpreted, and by who, continues to require close attention. Often, the media are quick to magnify views that are extreme and seemingly newsworthy. But how do religious communities understand and articulate their doctrinal and ethical convictions in the midst of noisy dissonance in the public sphere? At a more fundamental level that includes personal spirituality and lived religious experience, we cannot ignore the experiences of the supernatural that might sound strange in one culture but deeply impactful to another. Similarly, we must not dismiss the cry of the oppressed and turn a deaf ear to victims appealing for justice who increasingly disrupt the illusion of a world meant only for the survival of the strongest.

Hopefully, the Lutheran contributions through this collection and the work of the LWF throughout the years offer inspiring resources for further reflection and action. They are not meant to announce the final word or put an end to debate; rather, they have been, and still remain, points of departure for Christians committed to building bridges with people of other faiths. Increasingly, we recognize that interfaith relations and peace work overlaps with specific concerns around human rights, gender, and climate justice, as well as humanitarian work. Therefore, the LWF seeks to strengthen our contribution to these fields in a more integrated and synchronized manner through theological reflection, holistic mission, advocacy and serving people in need.

In line with the LWF Strategy 2019-2024, *Loving your neighbor – Encouraging constructive interfaith engagement* seeks to support the work of constructive interfaith engagement by fulfilling the affirmation that:

We will contribute Lutheran theological perspectives into interfaith conversations. We will foster interfaith learning and interreligious literacy among communities and religious leaders. We will equip member churches to engage in interreligious relations

in their own context. We will support interfaith initiatives on advocacy and diakonia, to make an impact and build bridges between faith communities.³

Indeed, it is our hope that this collection and other LWF resources may enhance our capacity to be “an active force for peace, justice, and reconciliation” starting from our own faith tradition, but also in solidarity and cooperation with neighbors from other religious communities..

As we progress into 2020 and beyond, looking back and reviewing lessons from the past is a valuable exercise so that we appreciate the work that has gone before us. Living in the present, when we are overwhelmed daily with complex local and global challenges, we might easily feel paralyzed by over-analysis or become cynical to the point of despair. Yet as people of faith, and as Lutherans in particular, we cling on to the truth that we are “liberated by God’s grace” to shape inclusive societies characterized by mutual hospitality and a shared commitment to a brighter future together.

³ The Lutheran World Federation Strategy 2019-2024 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2018).

The Challenge of Religious Pluralism to Christian Theological Reflection

J. Paul Rajashekar

I.

Religious pluralism has always been recognized by Christians as a historical fact. But the significance of that fact—and the questions it poses in Christian thought—has emerged only relatively recently as a prominent issue. As our world has become increasingly interconnected and interdependent—almost to the extent of becoming a global village—people from different religious traditions have not only come into greater contact but are also being exposed to mutual claims and commitments. Religious faiths that used to be self-enclosed and accustomed to living in isolation from one another now find themselves in a situation where they can no longer ignore the presence of others. The revival of some of the older world religions, the availability of more accurate information on the faith and practices of different religious traditions, and the migration of religious communities from one culture to another are some of the factors that have contributed to the emergence of what might be called a “pluralistic consciousness”, as opposed to a mere knowledge of some kind of “static pluralism” in the past. This new awareness has thus compelled Christian theologians and scholars to address the issue of religious pluralism and diversity as a significant issue on our theological agenda. For many, it is the single most important issue facing Christian theology today.

Among all religions of the world it is Christianity that has come to feel the intellectual and spiritual threat of religious pluralism most keenly. This pluralism raises the most difficult questions for those who seek to maintain belief in the universality of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. How is it possible to maintain the universality of Christianity when it is only one among the many? This question appears far more sharply now than it did in the previous centuries of Christian history. Christianity was indeed born in a religiously and culturally pluralistic milieu. But the very Christian claim that Christ is the “Lord” of all people, coupled with the urgency to proclaim that message and to call non-believers to faith, was in itself a form of response to religious pluralism. It would seem that the Christian claim precluded any understanding of an ongoing religious pluralism. Thus in the New Testament, especially in the writings of Paul, one finds a limited reflection and articulation of the problem that is very much tied up with the question of Christian identity in the Jewish-Gentile milieu.

In spite of greater interaction and some measure of borrowing of pagan religious practices and philosophical thought, much of the early Christian apologetics was intent on showing the superiority of Christianity over other forms of piety. The pagan religions of the Greco-Roman world did not present themselves as rivals to Christianity but rather as age-old traditions that demanded respect and honor. While noting some parallels to

their beliefs in pagan traditions, early Christian thinkers were keen on pointing to inadequacies and abhorrent implications of pagan piety. It is only in the writings of Origen (c.185-254) and Augustine (354-430) that one finds a more reflective discussion on the broader issues of religious plurality, though their intent was no less polemical.¹ The situation remained much the same in the subsequent centuries, in spite of the fact that Jews lived in the midst of “Christendom” and that Islam had made its presence felt in the medieval period. The challenge of Islam at that time was felt not so much at the theological but rather at the political level, and hence the relations between Muslims and Christians were dominated by warfare in much of Christian history.

The age of European geographical explorations in the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries stimulated a new interest in other religions, partly on account of early missionary encounters with other cultures and partly due to the emergence of historical consciousness and the resultant studies in comparative religions during the period of the Enlightenment and Romanticism in Europe. However, it was only during the early 19th century that theologians and philosophers like Friedrich Schleiermacher and Georg Hegel developed, in their own divergent ways, comparative approaches to religion in order to demonstrate the absoluteness of the Christian religion. The impact of both these thinkers on subsequent Christian theological reflection was enormous.

In the 20th century, Ernst Troeltsch was the first major Protestant figure to wrestle with the question of religious pluralism as a theological problematic. He shifted from his earlier judgment on the absolute superiority of Christianity among religions to a later view that Christianity was superior only in Western culture, and that within other cultures other higher religions could make a similar claim. This tendency to relativize Christianity met with opposition from Karl Barth. Barth’s interest centered on the meaning of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ and he was not much interested in any comparative analysis of religions. As a result the larger question of religion and religions that Troeltsch had grappled with was pushed to the periphery of Christian theological discussion. However, in spite of this, some of Barth’s contemporaries, notably Paul Althaus, Paul Tillich, Nathan Soderblom, Rudolf Otto, Reinhold Niebuhr and others continued to include the question of other religions in the theological agenda, partly in reaction to Barth and partly because of their interest in the phenomenology of religions or the history of religions. The notable contribution of Hendrik Kraemer, following the Barthian perspective, stimulated discussions on “non-Christian religions”, especially in the framework of the ecumenical movement and notably at the meeting of the International Missionary Council in Tambaram, India (1938). Since then many Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians have attempted to wrestle with the issue of religious pluralism.

It is evident from the foregoing cursory survey that the problematic of religious pluralism emerged as a significant issue only from the beginning of the 20th century. But the interest in the past two decades has considerably intensified on account of the experience that many Christians, especially in the West, have had of religious plurality and diversity. The increased interaction and new opportunities for interreligious dialogue between people of different faiths have considerably broadened the scope of

¹ Robert L. Wilken, “Religious Pluralism and Early Christian Theology”, *Interpretation*, Vol. XL, October 1986, No. 4, 379-391.

the issue. It is now realized that the challenge of religious pluralism is not only a matter of academic or theological interest but also has enormous practical implications. Thus the emerging reflections on the part of Christians and others on our contemporary situation has tended to push our theological discussions in new directions.

The recent spate of books on the subject of religious pluralism has, by and large, emerged from Christian discussions in academic or institutional contexts, often at an ecumenical level. But as the issue is widely discussed in the ecumenical movement there is a growing recognition that the concern is also of vital significance for those theological traditions that have a distinct theological emphasis or framework of understanding. If our situation of religious pluralism challenges anything, it raises fundamental questions in regard to our inherited theological assumptions and structures of thought. And it is precisely for this reason that traditions such as Lutheranism (which have affirmed a definite theological profile) cannot avoid facing the issue. In responding to this challenge, the Lutheran theological tradition will have an opportunity to review and renew its theological self-understanding in the present context and perhaps promote a Lutheran participation in the ongoing ecumenical discussions.

II.

The challenge to address religious pluralism explicitly on theological grounds has prompted many Christian theologians and scholars to attempt to formulate a "theology of religions". What this phrase generally implies is an interpretation of the presence of religious diversity within the framework of or in relation to Christian self-understanding. Different theologians approach this task from different theological vantage points: Some do this on the basis of a theology of creation; others from a theocentric perspective; and yet others from an eschatological point of view. Among Lutherans there is considerable interest in such a formulation, using Lutheran confessional principles. The emerging efforts have already stimulated considerable debate and discussions among scholars.

Some Lutherans have questioned the propriety of engaging in interreligious dialogue without a prior theology of religions, for example: "Interreligious dialogue can be adequately adapted and motivated only through a theology of religion developed prior to all programs, as an integral part of Christian identity."² Such a call does of course express a legitimate concern to construct a prior theology of religion, and our religious situation certainly demands a renewed affirmation of Christian identity. The nature of interreligious encounter is such that it takes us beyond our traditional domain. It involves crossing our set boundaries or perimeters of self-understanding and obliges us to explore rather unfamiliar territories. The further we penetrate such unfamiliar terrain the more we become self-conscious of our identity. Therefore, to avoid the risk of capitulating or relativizing Christian beliefs and convictions under the pressure of the immediate, pragmatic exigencies of our religious situation, we need to be sure about our identity in relation to others.

² Per Lønning, "Dialogue: A Question About Religiology", *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 37, No. 4, October 1985, 427.

While it is clear that a commitment to one's own confessional beliefs is a prerequisite for a genuine interreligious dialogue, does this necessarily imply that the theology of religion we want to forge can be done without any engagement with people of other faiths? By "theology of religion", do we mean a Christian hypothesis about the place of other faiths in God's plan of salvation? If this is so, how seriously does such an approach take the situation of religious pluralism and the questions it raises? Is theology of religion to be understood as a modern expression of traditional Christian apologetics, or is it something more? In other words, does it involve a critically conscious attempt to examine one's own or Christian communities' theological self-interpretation in face of the plurality of religious claims and options in order to understand ourselves in relation to others? These are some pertinent questions that have been raised by many who are wrestling with this issue theologically. They are also questions of method in present theological endeavors.

Certain difficulties arise when attempting to construct a theology of religion or religions, a priori. Such a theology aims to use the inner Christian rationale and deduces meaning from traditional doctrinal principles in order to proffer a contemporary response. The outcome—however progressive and positive an interpretation it may be about the role of other faiths in God's economy of salvation—will appear to be inadequate because it will only turn out to be postulates of our doctrines rather than interpretations of historical realities.

An approach of this kind inevitably succumbs to the risk of subordinating other religious positions to our own and, in so doing, not only misunderstands but also misinterprets them. Every religious tradition, insofar as it is a fact of history, has the right to be heard in light of its own historical self-understanding rather than be subsumed under some role assigned to it by Christianity. If our theology of religion is a form of Christian rationalization of the fact of religious diversity within the framework of our own commitments, criteria and goals, it will hardly provide an adequate response to the problem. Presumably, members of other religious traditions can do the same (and have indeed done so), and our own theological position is thus one among many in regard to religious truth.

If a doctrinal starting point seems rather problematic in our theological constructions, we still need to reckon with the fact that Christianity gives high importance to its normative doctrinal definitions, and we cannot avoid seeing ourselves in terms of these. It is not readily possible for us to bracket out our religious beliefs and convictions and examine other faiths from a neutral or "supra-confessionalist" standpoint. As a matter of fact, every religious faith knows itself from within and knows all others from without. We can only theologize the faith of the Christian community in its relations to others, and in principle the faith of another religious community cannot be the object of our theology. Whatever objective interpretation we may proffer about another faith is very much influenced by the historical givens of our own religious tradition. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith has pointed out, every theology is therefore inescapably a self-theology undertaken from the inside of one faith.³

³ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1981), 124.

According to some theologians, one way to overcome this difficulty is to abandon our theological parochialism and aim to forge a “world theology” that is informed by the whole religious history of humankind. Smith, being both a historian of religion and a theologian, has made a bold proposal that Christians, in collaboration with people of other faiths, should aim to construct a theology of the history of humankind.⁴ The proposal is indeed an attractive one, and Smith, through a sensitive analysis of different religious traditions, offers carefully nuanced hints on the possibility of constructing such a world theology. It is of course one theologian’s proposal, and whether people of other faiths will respond with enthusiasm remains to be seen. But what is problematic in Smith’s proposal, at least to some Christians, is that he posits “faith” as a category that is common to all religious traditions. This seems to suggest that, regardless of conceptual differences and divergent religious practices, religions are essentially the same. For Christians, such a prior assumption is troublesome because it not only dilutes the Christian claims of truth but also seeks to view divergent religious traditions from the perspective of a common denominator.

In pointing to the limitations of a parochial Christian theology of religions and also to the problem associated with the proposal to forge a world theology, we are confronted with the dilemma of how to proceed in responding to our situation. The point is not that such efforts should be abandoned. In spite of limitations and problematic assumptions, they may in their own way contribute to the broadening of Christian horizons. But, at the present juncture, religious pluralism provides an opportunity to mutually enrich one another, and we must take that seriously and strive to interpret creatively our experience of religious diversity in relation to our historical, total self-understanding. The challenge then is to interpret both our “situation” and our historical “self-understanding” in a mutually critical interaction. Of course, we cannot separate the two tasks, but we can distinguish between them; that is, we can take seriously the questions of religious meaning and truth raised by our religious situation, as well as the normative elements of our theological tradition, as distinct but related concerns that require mutual correlation.⁵ In other words, in attempting to assess the theological significance of religious plurality in our midst, we are also invariably involved in assessing the significance of our faith commitments in that situation.

The perspective that is suggested here does not adopt a relativistic stance which assumes that all religions are the same; nor does it claim that they have an experiential core or underlying unity. What it does presume is that faiths have different historical origins, that they have undergone a different process of cultural conditioning, and that their fiduciary frameworks are unique to themselves. The uniqueness of each is not a denial of the homologous ideas and concepts between them. A sensitive recognition of the distinctiveness of each faith will rule out any claims of ontological superiority. However, the suggestion does envisage that, in

⁴ Ibid., 152-179.

⁵ The method suggested here is basically Tillichian, but it is further elaborated by David Tracy in his *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1981).

the process of mutual engagement and dialogue, Christians and others would have opportunities to deepen their respective religious commitment in newer ways than before. In acknowledging the distinctness of each faith the challenge of religious pluralism becomes explicit. The claims put forward by each religious community are bound to arouse our theological sensitivities. "By what authority" do faiths claim their self-sufficiency? How can religious faiths claim self-legitimacy and self-warrant without wrestling with the counterclaims put forward by others? In spite of mutual interaction and interplay, religious traditions (at times explicitly, at times in subtler ways) have tended to adopt a posture of self-reference and have developed a self-enclosed character that is radically questioned in situations of mutual encounter. This means that the religious reflections and historical self-understandings of a religious tradition that has hitherto catered to the needs of its own community and has developed its own concerns and criteria are forced to become public—that is to justify its distinctness and exclusiveness under insistent interrogation by others. Religious pluralism thus calls for a self-introspection that may gradually result in a breaking down of rigid barriers in our doctrinal understanding of others and may open up possibilities for mutual appropriation of insights.

This is indeed a new kind of theological task, a task that aims to encompass within its horizon the religious experiences of others in an inclusive way. It means going beyond the culturally circumscribed visions of our theological understanding. The frontiers of Christian theology have always been set within its own perimeters. It was hardly conceivable in the past that they could also lie within the sphere of the Hindu, the Muslim, or the Buddhist. But in the context of today's interreligious encounter we have the opportunity to move away from an exclusive theology of self-reference to what Kenneth Cragg has called a lively "theology of cross-reference". As Cragg puts it: "Theology's first task, therefore, is to interrogate this diversity of self-legitimation, its own and that of others, and seek what might establish between us the sort of bona fide relationship which does not exempt its own credentials from engagement with the other."⁶

An approach of this kind presupposes that our theology is forged in dialogical encounters with others. Our motivations for engaging in dialogue are thereby strengthened, and in the process of conversation we are exposed to the fundamental religious questions that various traditions have wrestled with and whose answers need to be critically correlated with our own historical self-understanding. One cannot presume that the responses from our own tradition to the questions posed by others will be adequate. To provide effective responses, our traditional theological self-interpretations may need to be revised, reconceived, and reconceptualized. In this mutual interaction there is every possibility that we may hear familiar resonances, continuities, similar concerns, and similar interpretations of the mystery. For Christians, it is to be hoped that dimensions of the gospel will irrupt in unexpected places. On the other hand, the radical disjunctions or more existential confrontations that may appear between two traditions will need to be put in perspective. Our theological effort thus involves taking seriously the data

⁶ Kenneth Cragg, *The Christ and the Faiths* (London: SPCK, 1986), 10.

of religions in their historical developments. However, when done in the context of a dialogical encounter, this data will cease to be impersonal systems of belief and will rather be seen as living symbols that have structured and directed the self-understanding of religious traditions.

The opportunity offered by religious pluralism to do theology in new ways will indeed have far-reaching consequences. Since the task has not yet been fully undertaken, it is not possible here to develop the content and contours of a cross-reference theology, let alone predict the consequences. Already in our contemporary Christian discussions there are efforts to move in this direction, and substantial contributions may soon emerge. But, at this point, in the light of our experience of religious pluralism, methodological considerations have become important. Two clarifying remarks may help to avoid misunderstanding the perspective suggested here.

First, there is the temptation to understand interreligious dialogue as a form of trading of commodities, in the sense that our gospel or theological principles are somehow made negotiable or compromised under popular pressure or in pursuit of mutual relations. This could hardly be the case. No faith that enters into dialogue could take a posture of indifference to its own claims. It is precisely at this point that the divergent truth claims of religious traditions come into sharp focus. It would seem that the posture of cross-reference leaves the question of truth as an open-ended question. How can one find any agreed frame of reference in which the differing claims of truth can be adjudicated? The difficulty posed here is not to be understood as a refusal to press the distinctive Christian claims. What it does imply is that Christians, by being attentive to the truth claims of others and especially to the questionings that give rise to different answers in other faiths, are compelled to incorporate those questions and answers in articulating their distinctive claim. It may indeed be that Christians recognize forms of truth in others as being “Christian”—not in the sense that they own it, but as expressions of God’s universal love. Even radical differences that emerge in mutual encounters may shed fresh light on our articulation of faith and thus enrich us in ways that we cannot predict. This process is a mutual one, and others experience the same with reference to their own fiduciary framework.

Thus, when faiths with different claims meet and converse, their claims of finality are to be articulated anew and cannot be simply assumed. All such articulations are then tempered and chastened by the experience of dialogue. In that process, Christians and others will have the opportunity to witness to their faith or make it commendable to others.

Second, any attempt to reconceive and reconceptualize our faith and the claims of our faith leads one to reckon with the *regulae fidei*, the regulative principles derived from Scriptures and doctrinal formulations developed by our tradition. For Lutherans, the Reformation principles and insights into the meaning of gospel demand faithfulness. However, the hermeneutical character of our theological task necessarily raises questions of theological continuity with the tradition.⁷ Should one

⁷ See the book by Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

feel inhibited by our traditional formulations of faith as found in the New Testament and in the subsequent creeds and confessions of the church? In answering such a question, we must remember that both the New Testament witness and, to a larger extent, the faith of the early church were articulated in a situation of active cross-reference. Outside the original Hebrew matrix, the encounters with Greek and Roman cultures shaped the idiom and vocabulary of Christian faith to a considerable extent. The fact that, especially since the Reformation, much of the later theological developments were culturally circumscribed need not be theologically inhibiting in our situation.

We have already noted that in our situation of religious pluralism all our traditional theological formulations and categories of understanding cannot be assumed to be adequate responses to the challenges before us. We are therefore compelled to develop our scriptural and confessional hermeneutic in correlation with modern issues. As Lutherans, we need to re-examine our traditional catchwords, such as “justification by faith”, “law and gospel”, “good works”. Lutherans will need to articulate the nature of the faith that saves or justifies. What is the efficacy of the church in the economy of salvation? What does it mean to say that outside Christ there is no salvation? How and where does God work in history, and what is the nature of God’s work apart from Christ? Is it only creative, or is it also redemptive? What about the Spirit’s work in other cultural contexts?⁸ Such questions can to a certain extent be answered by using the inner logic of Christian faith, but far more satisfying answers can emerge through the theological discoveries we make in the process of our interreligious encounter. This may prompt us to evolve newer theological principles that may respond meaningfully to our situation. Being faithful to our inherited principles does not necessarily mean that we repeat the language of those principles; rather we should evolve principles that continue to represent the grammar of that faith, the reasons for which these principles were evolved.

Our religiously pluralistic situation can indeed be looked at as a matter of threat to be warded off or as an embarrassment to be studiously ignored. It can also be looked at as a reality with a positive meaning that we must seek to discover. It is worthwhile to remember that whatever responses we make are made within and not to the context of pluralism. For this reason we have no option but to do our theological reflection through a process of dialogue and mutual encounter with people of other faiths.

From J. Paul Rajashekar, “The Challenge of Religious Pluralism to Christian Theological Reflection”, in *Religious Pluralism and Lutheran Theology*, ed. J. Paul Rajashekar, (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1988), 9-21.

⁸ Some of these questions are raised by James A. Scherer in “Pluralism and Universalism as a Resource and/or Problem for Contemporary Lutheran Theology”, *Studies*, Lutheran Council in the USA, undated.

Some Theological Issues Between Muslims and Christians

Olaf Schumann

One of the first issues that comes to mind when thinking about theological issues between Christians and Muslims is the question: from where did Muhammad obtain his knowledge about Christianity? Hopefully an answer to this question may provide some hints on how we can answer the statements that we find in the Qur'an about Christ and Christianity. Let me try to answer this question first, but then add another one: how relevant is the historical background of Muhammad's knowledge for our theological dialogue?

It is not easy to detect how Muhammad came to know Christianity and Christ. There were of course travelling merchants visiting Mecca and we may presume that they participated in the usual evening entertainments, such as sitting together and telling stories, preferably about the heroes of the past, including religious heroes. Another source may have been Christian slaves in the household of Muhammad or his associates. It is also recorded that he travelled to Syria together with his caravan. But these records are based on legend and may not be too important. What we can see from the passages in the Qur'an in which the stories of Jesus are told is the fact that Muhammad did not obtain them through reading himself in the Bible or the New Testament which at that time had probably not yet been translated into Arabic, even not in parts. Moreover, details in these stories are very similar to stories we find in Christian or Jewish apocrypha, i.e. books that are not canonical and that originated in the parishes, probably at times as catechetical explanations of Biblical texts. They therefore represent a kind of popular theology, or at least a kind of popular understanding of Christianity. They were not the work of theologians and therefore contain many inaccuracies, and sometimes very problematic theological accounts, laying stress more on miracles and fancies than on accuracy of theological thinking and expression. This is, briefly expressed, the historical background.

But what does this mean for our theological encounter with Muslims? For them, what is important is not the historical parallels or differences of interpretation or understanding but rather the fact that these accounts are written in the Qur'an. For Muslims the Qur'an is the inspired word of God which contains no errors. We may therefore put the historical question aside, take the Qur'anic text as it is and simply ask: what are the theological issues as they are stated in the Qur'an?

In order to answer this question, I want to point to three major issues:

- the problem of the person of Jesus who is called the "Son of God" by the Christians,
- the question of the Trinity,
- the question of the cross.

As can be seen, these questions are of a dogmatic character. The personal relationship with the Christians and Muhammad's or the Qur'an's opinion about their ethical and moral behavior were on the whole positive, although some tensions may occasionally have occurred. Let us therefore turn now to these theological questions. I shall try to discuss them in a dialogical way, taking these questions not only as statements coming out of another dogmatics that have to be answered by my own, or our Christian, dogmatics. I will try to take them as a challenge to my own and our Christian way of doing theology, to some of the theological and dogmatic conclusions we have inherited from our Christian ancestors, and thus as an invitation to reconsider some of those expressions of our faith which are questioned by the Muslims.

Let us start with the first point—Jesus as the “Son of God.” The Qur'anic attack against this expression is very sharp and emotional. Muhammad, coming out of a polytheistic environment full of gods, goddesses and their children, felt very much reminded of this idolatry practice. The habit of some Christians in his time to pray in front of an icon, or of decorating the churches with icons, must have strengthened his impression that the Christians were on the track of paganism when they called Jesus—a human creature and prophet according to Muhammad's understanding—the “Son of God.” The Qur'anic position in this matter is clear. God is one: “he never gave birth, nor was he born” (Sura CXII). In some Qur'anic discussions with God, Jesus himself refuses this title because it implies the greatest sin known in Islam: to adore someone or something beside the True and One God. This has no place at all in the faith of a true believer. If according to the Qur'an Christ himself rejects this title, it can only have been the Christians living after Christ who “made” him “Son of God,” without any basis in Christ's own teaching. We find in the Qur'an a strict refutation of Christ's divinity. He is considered to be pure man, created in the womb of the Virgin Mary by a word of God and thus, being pure creature, is not to be distinguished or exalted from other creatures. He is named **'ebed YBVH**, a servant, or slave, of God and this is in fact the most appropriate title that can be bestowed on any human being: as a Servant of God he fulfils his destination for which God created humankind: to serve him and work as the keeper of his household in creation.

As Christian theologians we can, of course, now start to argue that the Qur'anic understanding of this term does not apply to what we believe and is therefore a distortion. According to the Qur'an, question seems to have been that Jesus Christ and even his mother the Virgin Mary, were adored as gods besides God (the Father). There have been similar beliefs in ancient times; for instance the Egyptians believed in Horus, the divine son of Osiris and Isis, and some Christian Egyptians living in Mecca or Arabia may have had some knowledge of this. But a little insight into the religion of the Egyptians and a comparison with the Christian teaching about Christ's sonship of God quickly shows that there is no parallel at all between both conceptions. Starting from what the Qur'an says about the “Son of God” can only produce a long discussion (and indeed there have already been 14 centuries of discussion) with no result. I will not be able to provide a solution to the age-old dispute either. However, I think we should now ask why this problem has not been solved until now? There is a first simple answer

to this question: if it is assumed that the Qur'anic reference concerns Christian teaching, then the whole starting point is already wrong. And wrong questions cannot lead to right answers. A tentative second answer to the question may be that, because Christ's Sonship of God is a mystery that cannot be solved by arguing, it is a matter of faith and therefore only God's grace can open the mind to understand its meaning and truth.

Having given this tentative answer we now have to ask ourselves whether the way Christians talked about Jesus as the Son of God was not another reason why Muslims from Muhammad's time onwards could not understand its meaning correctly. It is therefore urgent for us to rethink this topic of our faith. Such a need often occurs in dialogue; one partner is challenged to re-reflect on some of the basic expressions of faith inherited in his/her community. Let us therefore take up this matter and question the meaning and significance of our naming Jesus as the "Son of God." To do this we have to look into the Bible and the history of the church. If we look into the New Testament, we find that Christ himself was reluctant to use the term "Son of God." One instance may make this clear. In his famous talk with Peter, Matt.16:18 f., the disciple confesses Jesus to be "the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." In his answer, Jesus says that this confession has been inspired by God and that it has not been thought of by a human being. But later on, Jesus omits this title in order not to let it be misunderstood and orders his disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah (v .20). Nothing is said about the "Son of God"!

What then was Jesus' own understanding of himself? From the testimony in the four Gospels, it becomes clear that the first item on Jesus' agenda was the preaching of repentance because the Kingdom of God was near. With Jesus come the signs of this kingdom, visible to those who believe in him. "The blind see again, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised to life and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor, and happy is the man who does not lose faith in me" (Matt. 11:5). These were signs of the Kingdom of God and were very real and concrete for those who were touched by them. For them, the Kingdom of God was not a part of a mythical future but part of their life at that point and not to be merely understood as something spiritual. But Jesus also made it clear that he was not to establish a worldly kingdom.

For those who witnessed Jesus, it was impossible to separate his message from his person. Those who came in touch with him felt that everything he said touched their lives. They were therefore astonished and shocked by what they experienced. For them the mystery of his person lay in his relationship to God. It is not a relationship of splendor and luxury, of power and glory, but rather one of obedience and humbleness. He obviously rejected, or at least minimized the title "Son of God" and preferred "Messiah" which Peter had mentioned. But again, this title could be misunderstood because for many Jews of that time the Messiah was expected to be the "new David," a mighty warrior king who would "save" his people by fighting the Roman army, driving it out of the country and re-establishing the old kingdom of David. Although Jesus refused this political meaning of the "Messiah," he accepted other aspects, namely that the Messiah is like the shepherd who guides and protects his flock and is thus like a servant

to those for whom he is given responsibility. This meaning of the “Messiah” was accepted and the first followers of Christ thus felt reminded of the “Servant of God,” the ‘ebed YHWH of the prophet Isaiah whose service led to such an identification with his people that he even took up their grievances and sorrows, their sickness and suffering, and thus brought them healing and salvation.

This understanding of Jesus as the Messiah came from the way he dealt with people, the way he served them and brought relief even to those who were despised. Such conduct had never been seen before and it was therefore felt that this humble man must get his strength from God. I think that we cannot stress strongly enough that Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah by his humbleness and by the way, he uses his strength not to kill the enemy but to serve humankind with whatever they need for life. This was the image the disciples received from him and is reflected in one of the oldest hymns formulated by our Christian forebears and contained in St Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, 2: 5-11. Paul introduces this hymn with an admonition to his readers.

His state was divine,
yet he did not cling
to his equality with God
but emptied himself
to assume the condition of a slave,
and became as men are;
and being as all men are,
he was humbler yet,
even to accepting death,
death on a cross.
But God raised him high
and gave him the name
which is above all other names
so that all beings
in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld,
should bend the knee at the name of Jesus
and that every tongue should acclaim
Jesus Christ as Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Paul introduces this hymn with a *paraenesis*, an admonishment to his readers: they should copy Jesus in their attitudes. To avoid misunderstanding, they should copy his attitude but not his nature; follow him in his human behavior but not adore him in that. Although Jesus Christ had the nature of God, he did not stick to it. I think this is also a first very important remark for our reflection on Christ’s relation to God, bearing in mind the Muslims’ refutation of naming him the Son of God. Christ was willing to renounce his divine nature, and did just that. This is a very different attitude to that of Adam and all humankind after him: Adam wanted to be like God, take the place of God—and precisely that attitude led him and his descendants to sin and death: they are not like God. Christ, on the

other hand, became man of his own free will. He did not only take the outward shape of man as Gnosticism had it—he became real man, exactly like every other man. And he even became a servant of man, thus occupying the lowest position in the hierarchy of society. He was real **'ebed**, or, as the Arabs call it, **'abd**. And for this, he is the example for all who want to follow him. We misinterpret the hymn unless we recognize that in verse 9 there is a change of subject. Jesus Christ is the subject for everything that has to do with his human life on earth until his death, to which he also consented. This is the example which disciples must follow to the end of time. Having fulfilled his human destiny, Christ stops to be the subject. God himself continues the story: he calls him back to life and gives him the name which is greater than any other name. In other words, God acknowledges himself that Jesus Christ is his Son, that he is the Kyrios, or Lord, who reigns in this world until the end of time when Jesus will put everything back into the hands of the Father.

If we look at this point (that neither Christ nor the Christians exalted Jesus but rather God himself), we find that the Qur'an is quite correct when it stresses at various points that it was not Jesus himself who taught his disciples to call him "Son of God." Jesus did not claim this. It was God himself who acknowledged him as his Son, after Jesus Christ had accomplished his way as man. We now have to draw a conclusion. Christ's dignity as the "Son of God" cannot be separated from his humbleness as the obedient servant. In his attitude of true servant, Christ revealed himself as the Son of God. This was not visible for those who did not believe in him, and even for those who became his followers, it remained a mystery that often led them to doubts. But in the resurrection, God himself took the veils away from their eyes and they could see the marks of the nails in the risen body. The risen Christ is identical with the human Christ. Thus, Jesus did not become the Son of God through the resurrection; he **was** it also as servant.

To identify both, the early Christians were helped by the Greek language. When some decades before Christ the Scriptures of the Old Testament were translated into Greek, the Hebrew term **'ebed**, slave or servant, was translated by the word **pais**. This word may mean both "son" as well as a "servant who enjoys the full confidence of his master because of his reliability." And here we are: the Servant of God is the Son of God, his reliability and faithfulness to the Father in his obedience and service is the expression of the power and glory of the Divine Lord.

For the early Christians, this obedience and service was indeed an expression of power. But this power had its source in love. Therefore, because of this source, Jesus Christ was able to endure his own suffering to the end. Power alone, if Jesus had had to depend on it, would not have been strong enough to let him endure all his pain, physically and psychically, to the point where he even doubted God's presence (Matt. 27:46). Power can help but only to the limits to which its strength reaches. How the power of love rules is expressed in I Cor. 13. From this source of love spring also those signs of the Kingdom of God that make the believers feel and realize that already in this world their lives are changed and ruled by its healing, justifying and life spending power.

This is the character of God's power and glory into which every human being is called to participate. This excludes the rule of one over the other. And at the

same time it is the source of Christian hope, based on the promise that “those who are in Christ” will also be taken into the communion with the Father, as Jesus has been taken. This hope makes their life worth living; it includes also the obligation to help those who are still prevented from attaining life in its fullness. Christ’s humanity obliges us to take very seriously every aspect in the life of human beings and if this is not the case then Christ’s humanity is not taken seriously either (Matt. 25:31 ff.). Since the believers already feel the signs of this communion in their lives, their hope is based on solid ground, knowing however that the final confirmation of it is not as the second part of the hymn in Philippians 2 points out in their hands but rests with God.

If we look into church history and see how the church has used the title of “Son of God,” we may feel concerned. For the church, the paradigm of God’s power and glory was not to be searched for among the sinful, the sick and the outcasts. For the church, the paradigm of God’s power and glory were the kings, sometimes even warlords, and it all too often associated itself with conquerors and was silent when injustice was done. Such an attitude has distorted the meaning of Christ’s Sonship of God and has produced the opposite: not to serve the people but to rule over them together with those in power.

It is right that Jesus Christ as the *kyrios* is the ruler to whom all power is given. But the hymns in Philippians and other places in the New Testament make it clear that Christ rules as the servant. He withstood all temptations to change this situation, e.g. when Satan showed him the kingdoms of earth and invited him to rule over them (Luke 4:5-8) and the day of his arrest when some of his disciples wanted to fight and one had already betrayed him (John 18:10; Matt. 26:51ff). But I think that the church cannot claim to have resisted temptation and that all too often, when power has offered its services, the church has eagerly accepted and has in turn become its prey.

I feel that precisely here Christians should hear a message in the Qur’an’s denial of Christ’s Sonship of God, 600 years after Christ himself lived. Must the Qur’an remind Christians that the Son of God is only Son of God as far as he is the Servant of God, the ‘abd Allah? Why should not Christians take seriously the call of the Qur’an as a call to repentance? This would have many consequences. I only want to mention one here, for it follows the line of interpretation suggested here, that Christ did not, could not, and would not establish a worldly Kingdom of God. Muslims often point to this fact and add that, therefore, Christ’s message remained uncompleted and needed another, later, prophet to accomplish it and establish the “Kingdom of God” based on God’s commandments, communicated through the Qur’anic revelation and explained in the *shari’a*, the “Islamic Law.”

But Christians may now ask the Muslims whether, if the Islamic understanding of the Kingdom of God is correct, it is also a Kingdom in which rule is identical with service, where power is identical with love? Does the Islamic Kingdom exclude worldly power and restrict itself to service, seeing the mixture with world power as an unholy temptation? We leave this as a question, a question to the Muslims that comes out of a question of theirs to the Christians, and we return to our problem, the Messiah as the Servant of God, or ‘abd Allah. We should not consider it as minimizing Christ’s dignity if the Qur’an stresses his being a Servant. It is in fact

the most appropriate title he could be given and it corresponds to Christ's own attitude and to the understanding of the Early Church when it spoke about Christ the human being. To name him the Son of God was an act of confession, born out of the faith in God's resurrecting him from death.

However, the church did not keep to this understanding. It came to understand Christ as the Lord who reigns, and later even as the "pantokrator" and King whom the worldly kings should accept as their superior. Thus, Christ's reign as Son was no longer understood as service but as rule, including political rule. Christians then adopted another attitude. They stopped imitating the Serving Christ, as the hymn urged them to do, but behaved rather as partakers in his rule over the world; at any rate they developed a sense of superiority, of being more than others and closer to God. Muhammad also felt this and in some places the Qur'an reminds Christians that they are human beings like others, and nothing more than others (Sura V, 18). I therefore think that the aggressiveness against the title "Son of God" originated partly as a response to the arrogant and superior attitudes of Christians who thought of themselves as followers of the Son of God. The Qur'an was right to condemn such attitudes.

If this is clear, then the Christians but only then can state that for them Christ is still the Son of God, and they can try to explain why it is so. If this title is understood in the way the New Testament understands it, then there need be no fear that behind it is a human attempt to challenge God's uniqueness. On the contrary, it is taken seriously because Christ in his human existence demanded no divine veneration. What he demanded was discipleship.

Now that we have taken seriously the Muslims' point about the Messiah as the 'abd Allah, we should go on to another point of argument, namely the crucifixion. According to my understanding, it also has its theological place, as far as it is related to redemption, there where Jesus' humanity is at stake. It should not be a separate point. To underline this understanding, let me mention 1 Tim. 2:5, where it is stressed that it is Jesus the man who acts as mediator between humankind and God and, we might add, as redeemer as well. The Qur'an seems to deny that Christ was crucified and that he died on the cross. In Sura IV, 157, we read that the Jews did not kill or crucify him and that the matter became dubious for them. One of the more usual understandings of these last words, "the matter became dubious to them," is not that a matter but a person became "dubious," or resembled Jesus and the Jews killed this person instead of Jesus. However this may be, the text is not clear and we have heard from the leader of the Ahmadiyya (during a visit to the mosque in Nairobi at the time of our seminar) that this group accepts the fact that Jesus was put on the cross, but that he was taken down while he was still in a coma, but alive.

This shows that the Qur'anic text itself is open to different interpretations. If we take up the methods of Islamic interpretation of the Qur'an, according to which one verse may be interpreted by another verse, and if we take expressions about Christ's exaltation, then we may also come to the following argumentation: of course the Jews were wrong in claiming that they were the movers, or subjects, who decided on Christ's destiny. The real subject was Christ, in accordance with God's will, and the Jews were mere tools. This would even come close to John's

understanding of the crucifixion which for him was in fact Christ's exaltation, or at least the first step towards it. We must be aware, of course, that such an interpretation would not find much ground in the traditional Islamic interpretation of this verse. But if we take seriously the invitation to dialogue, which also implies a new look into the Scriptures and their meaning, we may also expect some appreciative response to such an interpretation of the Islamic Scripture, as it does not contradict the Qur'anic verse on the matter.

Another point should be mentioned. We have let us be reminded of Christ's humanity and humility. Having accepted this argument from the Muslims, we may now in turn ask: why do the Muslims themselves not take this argument seriously, even to the final consequence? Christ's humility in his service and obedience to the will of the Father did not stop in front of the cross but includes it. Because on the cross human temptation to put oneself beside God is broken. Therefore, the task of the Servant of God to free humankind from this sin and its consequences in death, sickness, injustice, would have been incomplete if the cross had been excluded.

This role of Jesus Christ is unique in human history. This close relationship between God and humankind has never been witnessed elsewhere. In Jesus' time, *abba*, father, was a unique expression to address God. Out of this trustful relationship in love Jesus could fulfil his road to the cross. There is therefore no other son of God, or perfect 'abd Allah, besides Jesus Christ.

I have talked at length about the problem of Christ's humanity and divinity because I think that it implies most of the theological questions between Muslims and Christians. There are some others of which I will just mention a few.

The crucifixion is not only a matter of historical interest but Christians base their belief in God's justification of sinful humankind on it. Through the man Jesus Christ, God took away the reward of sin, namely death, through the death of this person. Those who believe in him and in his divine task are declared free from the destiny of eternal death. This belief implies the conception of the original sin which human beings cannot overcome out of their own strength. We must be aware that Muslims, like Jews, do not accept this belief. For them, the human being expresses the **tauhid**, or confession of God's unity, before the actual creation. Thus, the knowledge of **tauhid** is a constitutional part of human nature which was never distorted. Sin is always understood as actual sin and can be extinguished by accepting temporal punishment and by exercising **tauba**, i.e. asking forgiveness from God which he, in his mercy, usually grants. Another matter of continuous dispute is the question of Divine Trinity. Let us just state that Christianity never believed in **tathlith**, as the Muslims express it. The term already shows the roots of misconception. The Islamic term for trinity, **tathlith**, is formed according to **tauhid**, i.e. confessing, or making one, respectively confessing, or making three. Christianity never made three gods but believed in the One God who revealed himself in three persons. Based on our explanation of Christ's relationship with God, it becomes clear that Christ is not a God besides the Father but that the Father revealed himself through the Son, and that therefore both are one in the unity of the Holy Spirit. However, it is a dynamic unity and not static in the way the Islamic Divine "**daht**" (essence) has often been explained by Muslim scholars.

But again, I think that we Christians were the cause of the Muslim misunderstanding. To give just one example: we often use the formula “In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” Are we aware that this wording implies a heresy and that, strictly speaking, we should say: “In the name of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” I am always struck by the tradition of the Egyptian Orthodox Copts who add “One God: **Bi-smi-llahi l-ab wa-l-ibn wa-r-ruh al-qudus, ilahun wahidun**. Perhaps Christians should reflect more carefully on the terminology they use, so as to avoid this talk about “Christian tritheism.”

I should now like to mention one last point a point that concerns the Muslims and that is decisive for our relationship with them. It concerns Muhammad and his prophethood. Our relationship with Muslims can never be good as long as Christians despise or ridicule Muhammad. It is a matter of respect and decency to speak honestly about him. His person has often been attacked in Christian tradition, in the same way that Muslims have attacked the Trinity. Little of what Christians have said against Muhammad is true; their evaluation of certain trends in his character has been inadequate, and has not taken into account the time and circumstances of his life, etc. As far as Muhammad has been compared with Jesus Christ, Christians themselves should have known from their scripture that a prophet cannot be compared with the “Son of God” (Hebrews 1:1f). I simply want to mention that Muslims themselves have never considered Muhammad as the perfect man devoid of human errors. Just because of such human imperfections, he became an example for Muslims and for their way of life. Reasonable people should know that the “Perfect Man” of Islamic mysticism is something else. However, what interests us more than Muhammad’s personality is the claim of his prophethood. Was he a prophet? For the Muslims, of course, he was one. And for the Christians? Let me answer this by posing what may be a “shocking” question: why not? Why should Christians not see Muhammad as a prophet? But if we do this, we must make clear what we mean. As Christians, we try in the first instance to understand the meaning of prophethood from the Bible and there we meet different types of prophets. In the Old Testament we find those who function as the “voice of conscience,” and others who are known by the books where their prophecies have been collected. In the New Testament also there are prophets. They appear by the side of apostles and teachers in the leadership of a congregation. All of them are quite convinced that God himself has chosen them to transmit certain messages and that they stand in the religious tradition of their people rather than bring new teachings to them. Their aim is to call the people, or certain persons, back to obedience to God, to attack unbelief and injustice, and to call for repentance. There are also many other differences among prophets.

There are many parallels between the biblical prophets and Muhammad. Muhammad, like Jeremiah, was at first reluctant to accept his call and only did so after struggling with God’s messenger. He often stressed that he had not come to bring new teachings but that they were those of former prophets: he especially emphasized the prophetic tradition via Abraham, Moses and Jesus. The core of their prophetic call was the proclamation of the First Commandment. In this respect Muhammad can be seen as an authentic heir of the prophetic tradition.

There are two points where the Christian, or biblical, understanding differs from the Islamic and to which Christians would object:

- To bring a literally inspired book to people is a strange idea to the biblical understanding of prophethood. The prophets in the Bible always expressed the divine word in their own human words. Only short formulas may have been proclaimed as “n’um YHVH,” whisper of God.
- Muhammad became a statesman as well as holding his prophetic role. This combination of two roles as part of the general understanding of prophethood in Islam is not found in biblical tradition. One may of course point to Moses’ role as a leader of the Israelites but this function distinguished him from other Old Testament prophets.

We see therefore that the Muslim understanding of a prophet differs in certain points from that of the Christians. If we say that we are prepared to see Muhammad as a prophet, we do this as Christians, with a Christian understanding of prophethood, and without accepting the Islamic understanding. Muhammad’s zeal for God among the Meccan polytheists, as well as his constant efforts to get his own people to accept God as the only master in their lives was a truly prophetic task.

We naturally also see a substantial difference between Jesus and Muhammad. The Qur’an includes Jesus among the prophets but according to the New Testament, he is more than that. There he is called the “Word of God.” This does not only contain God’s will and aim for this world, teaching them to humankind as does the Qur’an. The biblical Word of God also works for the salvation of the universe and does not only point to the way which leads to it. In this, Jesus differs from every prophet, including Muhammad. It would therefore make no sense, at least for a Christian, to compare Muhammad with Jesus, or to take Jesus as a measure for Muhammad and to show Muhammad’s “inferiority.” For the Muslim, Muhammad has never been more than a prophet and messenger, and Christians should therefore not make more of him either.

The question whether Christians may see Muhammad as a prophet should thus be based on the biblical conception of prophethood, and on the theological points in Muhammad’s message. It should not be based on a comparison between Jesus and Muhammad. If Christians are aware of their conception of prophethood, and clarify their theological terminology in this respect, a dialogue with the Muslims on this matter could reach another, more constructive, level than it has done in the past.

From Olaf Schumann, “Some Theological Issues Between Muslims and Christians”, in *Christian-Muslim Relations in Eastern Africa*, ed. J. Paul Rajashekar, (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1988), 30-41.

The Theological Challenges of the Encounter Between Christianity and Other Religions in Europe

Reinhard Hummel

The Religious Situation in Modern Europe

In the last few years more and more voices have been raised demanding a radical change in the relation of Christianity to other religions: a Rubicon has to be crossed (so the argument runs), a Copernican revolution implemented; the age of mission has been replaced once for all by an age of dialogue; Christianity must give up its absolute claim and open its eyes to the other faiths; the theological exclusiveness of past centuries and the inclusiveness of past decades must (it is said) give place to a theological pluralism that takes the equivalence and equal rights of these religions seriously. Well-known theologians see in this the one great challenge with which the religious pluralism of the present time confronts the Christian world.

This thesis, while it is also justified theologically, has primarily a moralizing basis: the potential for religious conflict must be defused and the age of wars of religion ended once for all so that peace may come, at least in the field of religion where for centuries wars of religion, persecution of people of other faiths, the Inquisition and so on prevailed. This argument is therefore persuasive, and is effective in the public eye because it is actually not at all new but can link onto ideas which have enjoyed great popularity since the days of the Enlightenment.

My plea is that we should talk in the plural about theological challenges in the encounter of faiths in Europe. It is certainly true that religious militancy exists in Europe too, but it is not the only nor even the greatest danger and challenge to theology and the church here. The religious situation in Europe is complex and not uniform, and consequently the tasks and challenges arising from this cannot be reduced to a single denominator. Let us first of all keep before us the most important characteristics of this situation (primarily from a central European viewpoint) without going into a more radical analysis.

- In Europe religious pluralism does not merely mean that Christianity has lost its monopoly and has to coexist with other faiths, as has long been the case in other continents. Here the encounter between the faiths takes place rather in the context of secularization and individualization, and that means in the context of a fundamentally altered religious attitude altogether. The greatest challenge consists in Western Christianity's learning to adapt to these transformations.
- In Europe individuals not only have free choice among humanity's religious traditions but in figurative terms can unwrap the packages of the great faiths,

rearrange the contents and so put together an eclectic, syncretistic mixture which satisfies their needs of the moment. There is a broad range of interfaith attitudes from frivolous religious consumerism to serious attempts at an individual religious synthesis. Handling this individual syncretism as well as syncretistic new formations represents a significant theological challenge, and also raises the question of Christian identity and of a new Christian apologetic in the context of interfaith encounters. (Part of the problem of syncretism is also the connection of religion with politics, therapy and/or the profit-motive, which exists in many groups and makes it increasingly difficult to make a clean divide between the religious and the non-religious spheres.)

- In many parts of Europe the process of secularization is leading to an “evaporation” of the Christian faith to a great extent, and to a shrinkage in the number of church members. The churches must strive for a missionary presence on the “religions market” and make their own voice heard and recognizable in the general confusion of voices. This places the question of the European churches’ mission right on their own doorstep and not just in distant countries.
- The dissolution of the great religious and confessional blocks does indeed give rise to fundamentalist countermovements which pay heed to defining their bounds and create a climate of religious militancy. Despite this the prospects are that the number of people not belonging to any religion will probably increase. They are not helped by a pluralist answer to the question of truth.
- The presence of the world faiths and new religions in Europe can be traced for the most part to migration, and to a lesser extent to mission. On the one hand the churches have to deal with ethnic Islam, Hinduism and so on, and on the other with the missionary presence of world faiths and new religions, and with a far-reaching readiness on the part of European culture to welcome other than Christian ideas (at the moment Buddhism first and foremost). Alongside the encounter with faiths in dialogue there is also a continuing missionary encounter which presents an important challenge.

The Quest for Commonalities as a Theological Problem

Before I go into the theological challenges that present themselves in this summary analysis, I should like to make two preliminary remarks. First of all, not only academic religious studies but above all theology has a responsibility for the broad range of problems arising from the encounter of Christianity with the other religions. The insights of academic religious studies are indeed important for theological work too, and indispensable for constant correction of Christian prejudices. The definition of Christian identity and of its relation to other faiths is however a matter for Christianity itself and so for theology. Generally what A. Feldtkeller has said about the problem of syncretism holds good for all religions: “Definitions of the relations between religions are in *every* case an exercise in

providing one's own religious testimonial, that is, they serve the purposes of a social or psychological system's self-understanding ... there is no court of appeal which could determine these relations independently of interest in its definition of its own religious identity—not even academic religious studies.” (*Evangelische Theologie*, 1992, p. 230).

My second preliminary remark relates to a study which was compiled in a joint undertaking by the German Lutherans and the United Churches [VELKD (Vereinigte Evangelisch Lutherische Kirche Deutschlands, United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany) and AKF (Arnoldshainer Konferenz/ Arnoldshain Conference)] which appeared with the title *Religionen, Religiosität und christlicher Glaube* (“Religions, Religious Attitudes and the Christian Faith,” Giitersloh 1991). The study refuses to reduce interfaith encounter to dialogue. It defines not only the activity but also the existence [*das Sein*] of the churches in relation to the other faiths in a threefold way: as mission, dialogue and coexistence (*Konvivenz*). It backs this up in Trinitarian fashion: mission is founded on the activity of the Spirit, dialogue in the revelation of Jesus Christ as the Word of God, coexistence in the activity in the world of its Creator and Sustainer (p. 117). All three approaches constitute a cohesive activity: mission is impossible without dialogue and coexistence; dialogue and coexistence are themselves mission because Jesus's disciples are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (p. 129). In the light of the study it would be an inadmissible simplification if we were to concentrate only on the social dimension of being good neighbors with those of other faiths (the term “coexistence” translates *Konvivenz*—*Spanish convivencia*, as used in Latin American discussion)—and seek to exclude the religious factor, or if we felt committed to dialogue alone, but considered witnessing to the faith an irksome intrusion and tried to banish it, thus establishing a claim to absoluteness on behalf of dialogue; or if we sought to reduce the encounter with other faiths to a call to believe, and sought to ignore the practical problems of living for those who belong to other faiths. The tension between good neighborliness, mutual exchanges and the offer of a faith must be maintained to the end.

The most important task for an up-to-date “theology of religions” consists in defining theologially as accurately as possible the sphere of what is common to Christianity and the other religions, and in this the study makes a valuable contribution. In this context “theological” means that we enquire into God's activity in the field of religions, not only into correspondences between religions in terms of religious studies. These correspondences are sufficiently well-known but require theological interpretation and appraisal.

John Hick's dictum about a “Copernican revolution” in relation to religions seems in my view to be exaggerated, but it does contain a core of truth. I should prefer to speak of a backward swing of the pendulum—away from a one sided emphasis on what separates the religions, an emphasis which was in the foreground in the era of world mission back to a quest for what religions have in common, for “commonalities” (*LWF Report* of 1986). To put it more specifically: What has a pious Lutheran in common with a pious Hindu? A Christian pastor with an Imam, a Catholic monk with his Buddhist colleague? What can they do together, what can they learn from each other? One can understand that the pendulum

may swing too far out occasionally and that new instances of one-sidedness are appearing. Thus at present the earlier demonizing of religions has been replaced not infrequently by an uncritical idealizing of them, especially in the mass media. As distinct from other theological notions the study I have mentioned defines God's activity in religions with a helpful sobriety, not Christologically or pneumatologically but only in the context of the First Article [of the Creed], i.e., in the sense of the divine government and maintenance of the world. The critical point in all attempts to give a theological definition of what religions have in common is whether Christian witness and (in the New Testament sense) mission can still be justified. Paul Knitter's attempt to outline the model of a "pluralist missionary" who "feels absolutely committed to a relative truth" illustrates the dilemma in which the pluralist theology of religion finds itself at this point.

Two obstacles stand first and foremost in the way of the quest for commonalities. First, the results of New Testament exegesis draw narrow limits. The interpretations of John 14:6 and similar passages in the Bible presented by pluralist theologians of religion to undergird their theories are exegetically dubious. On the other hand, one cannot apply the polemic against idols in the Old and New Testaments to religions such as Islam and Buddhism. Moreover present-day theology of religion must take seriously the fact that Christianity as a historical religion two thousand years old and with a long catalogue of sins cannot identify itself *simpliciter* with the eschatological community of the New Testament and its definition of the relation to Jews and Gentiles, nor above all with the anti-Jewish statements in the New Testament.

The second obstacle in the quest for commonalities is the suspicion of inclusivism. If it proceeds from a Christian standpoint, does not the listing of commonalities amount to an inclusivist take-over, a "co-option" of other religious traditions or elements of these, to use an expression of Stanley Samartha's? This danger can be avoided or at least reduced if common features are defined not unilaterally but in dialogue with the other side, and if inclusiveness occurs on the basis of reciprocity-i.e., both sides agreeing to note an inner relationship e.g. in the field of the worship of God, ethics, etc. The inclusivist approach cannot be wholly avoided. No religion can help perceiving other traditions from its own standpoint and referring back to its own criteria when evaluating them. So long as this happens with the necessary sensitivity we cannot consider it illegitimate.

Three Models for Discussion: Mystical, Ethical, Soteriological

I should now like to discuss three models which try to define what religions (including Christianity) have in common-the mystical, the ethical and the soteriological model. The *mystical* version of the pluralist model is the most popular, but to me it also seems the most questionable. It starts with the alleged basic identity of mystical experience in all the religions. The one divine light is broken up in the prism of cultural diversity. The specific religions are simply different language-games or myths. They must be transcended in the direction of mystical experience, and

this happens in meditation which leads from the circumference of the wheel to its hub. In this scheme the task of the church and of the individual pastor is reduced to the role of interfaith coordinator, helping people find an adequate interpretative system for their mystical experiences falls to the church and the individual pastor.

In criticism of this we may say that this model in practice really reinforces alienation from Christianity and from the specific religions and the tendency to an interfaith spirituality or "inter-religiosity." Conceptually we have to describe this model (with Lesslie Newbigin) as a Vedantizing of Christianity: A monistic concept serves as the superstructure for the variety of mystical experiences. Like Josef Sudbrack, the Jesuit, one can argue against it from a refined concept of mysticism, setting dialogical and personal mysticism over against the mysticism of universal unity (*All-Einheit*) and its experiences of "union" or "fusion" (*Verschmelzung*). (Such distinctions are also necessary when Zen and other oriental paths of meditation are practiced by Christians.) Other theologians challenge as George Lindbeck has done with arguments from linguistics ("The Nature of Doctrine," 1984)-the primacy of experience over conceptualizing, and claim that experiences are always given their character by concepts. Against the Vedantic concept of unity, attention is rightly drawn to Jewish thinking-Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, against Shankara, Nagarjuna and Plotinus.

Dialogue seen from a Christian standpoint must allow the others to be other. Religious pluralism will be overcome not through the vision of a higher unity but through agape understood in biblical terms. Agape accepts the others in their religious otherness, but also builds a bridge to them. It likewise inspires to mission, dialogue and coexistence and links together all three of the church's manifestations of life. Without *agape* mission becomes proselytism, dialogue becomes discussion without commitment, coexistence becomes mere neighborly considerateness.

The quest for common features between the faiths is more to the point in the sphere of *ethics*. I have to admit that I do not share the widespread dislike in Protestant circles of Hans Kiing's concept of a "global ethic." One may doubt that the "fundamental consensus relating to binding values, ultimate standards and basic personal attitudes" between the religions goes very deep and that religions at present find themselves in a condition which enables them to lead the way for society as a whole with its good example. But there is biblical justification for saying that ethics represents not only a generally religious phenomenon but a general human one; according to Romans 2:14f. and 3:19f. the "natural" knowledge of good and evil is sufficient, not indeed for salvation, but to make sin inexcusable and the sinner dependent on God's grace. But the law, specifically in Lutheran theology, also has a role in relation to the coexistence of human beings.

Thus, if there is something like a common ethic among the religions, this is to be found in the area of the First Article [of the Creed], i.e., God's activity in Creation and the world, in which he shows himself to be Creator, Lord and Sustainer of the world, as is also noted in the VELKD and AKF study already mentioned. From here one can build a bridge to Lutheran positions which assign religions to the sphere of the Law. We now know better than previously that [other] religions also promise salvation and claim to impart it, and indeed that according to Rudolf Otto there is also an Indian "religion of grace" (and a Japanese one as

well). But when the issue is a theological assessment of religions and their place within the activity of God, this place is best sought in the sphere of ethics and its function in sustaining the world. On this theological basis it is meaningful to strive for an agreement on standards and values, despite all the culturally and religiously conditioned differences in actual ethics. Such an agreement might create confidence and facilitate coexistence, the more so as those who are alien in the cultural and religious sense are generally held to be morally unreliable: we always think them capable of the worst.

In the question of *salvation* and the way of salvation, to which we now turn, religions part company with each other more definitely. There can be no disputing that all religions are concerned about salvation. Recognition of other religions therefore seems to imply also a recognition of their claim to impart salvation. We can certainly agree with the statement of the present Dalai Lama that all religions want us to be good people. But as regards the way to "being a good person," there is the greatest disagreement among the religions. Most of them know that the character of human beings must be fundamentally changed if they are to achieve the good. Extremely varied statements are made about how this is to happen. There is not even unanimity among them on the question whether salvation is a gift from a god, however he is to be described.

Unfortunately the question whether Christianity can recognize all religions as possessing equal ways to salvation has at present become almost a shibboleth by which Christian "tolerance" has to prove itself. In this connection it must first of all be pointed out that even non-Christian religions are by no means agreed that all religions lead to salvation. Meanwhile in the ecumenical debate Hindu voices (e.g. that of K. Sivaraman) have been loudly raised which describe religions as "alternative absolutes" (except in a transcendent sense) and reject the "paradise of the liberals." The oriental religions moreover (against the background of their cosmology and doctrine of reincarnation) do not have only the simple alternative of heaven and hell, salvation and damnation, but a multifarious gradation of states of salvation and its opposite, and generally the relative recognition of other religions refers-metaphorically-to reaching not the summit of the mountain, i.e. attaining liberation (Nirvana, Moksha, etc.) but rather its lower slopes. Even within their own religions it is by no means always conceded that the directions taken by other schools of thought can lead to the highest goal. The salvific value of other traditions is usually considered limited, adequate only to bring people somewhat closer to the goal on the long road through the cycle of rebirths, by virtue of a pious and moral life.

Before one concedes that religions are a sphere of activity of the Cosmic Christ and the Holy Spirit, and grants them the status of equal paths to salvation, we must first clarify where the activity of God is seen, what is understood by salvation, what it is that has to impart salvation. Is it merely to belong, which-as is well-known-is not enough even in the case of Christianity? Is it moral actions, which are variously rated and not always very highly valued in religions? Is it belief in God (which God?), forms of mystical union with the divine, practices of spiritual self-liberation such as Buddhist meditation on the non-self, or everything the various religions individually teach their adherents, taken together? Or is the only thing

of value for salvation in the other religions that which can be measured by the Christian standard: faith in the sense of renunciation of one's own righteousness, such as one can find in certain forms of Amida Buddhism and in Hindu Bhakti? In a pluralistic religious situation with frequently undefined religious allegiance, what is meant by the thesis of many pluralistic theologians of religion, that each religion is a way of salvation for its own particular adherents? How do we distinguish this information from relativism and optional pluralism as these are alluded to in the figure of the many ways that all lead to the same mountain?

On the other hand there can be no doubt as to the universality of the divine will for salvation. Statements by Paul (Rom. 11 :25ff.) on the eschatological salvation of Israel and—by Jesus (Matt. 8:11ff.)—of the Gentiles make it clear that the universal validity of the Christian message of salvation has its roots not in human activity but in the divine will for salvation and saving action. The parable of the Last Judgment (Matt. 25:31ff.), again, shows that human action in the sense of an ethic of mercy can become significant for salvation beyond the sphere of the People of God. God's rule and saving activity are not tied to the boundaries of Christian and church activity. Beyond the People of God Jesus found a faith such as he had not found in Israel (Matt. 8:10). Even a scribe could not be "far from the kingdom of God" (Mk. 12:34). All these statements can be systematized and harmonized only with difficulty. They open up the possibility of hope for universal salvation of all people, but not for a harmonizing vision of religious unity.

Consequences for Dialogue

We have been looking for what is common to all religions, or rather to Christianity and the other religions. It has become clear that the pendulum has in fact swung back. Common features do appear, of course, into varying degrees. No-one can say for certain whether the pendulum will swing even further back or return again soon. There are signs of both.

It was a long time before the tools were created through which a *rapprochement* between Christian denominations was able to take place. The interfaith tools are perhaps at present still inadequate and will be refined as time goes on. An interfaith hermeneutic is only on the point of coming into existence. Perhaps we shall learn to understand better the language of other faiths—or even what God is saying in other faiths. Common and divisive features often lie in close proximity to each other. To give an example, belief in reincarnation is alien to the Christian faith when we understand it in the sense of a doctrine about further lives after and before the present life. On the other hand as a description of human misery and the need of redemption in the traditional Asian religions (as a functional equivalent to the Christian conception of sin and law) the belief in reincarnation is not far removed from the New Testament message.

On the other hand we also have to take into account a new backward swing of the pendulum. Awakening fundamentalisms have again alienated religions further from each other (and even more from liberal-minded contemporaries). The euphoria from dialogue which existed in many places has vanished. Once again

there are religious “enemy images.” An interfaith realism beyond false images of friend and enemy is necessary. As a rule we have sought out partners in dialogue who are easy to deal with. Broad fields of the religions have not yet been laid hold of by the spirit of dialogue: fundamentalists and ethnocentrists, the more strongly exclusivist tendencies in many traditions, in a certain sense also those new religions for which dialogue is first and foremost a means of registering their claims to be the heirs of Christianity and the other faiths.

The present position of interfaith relations is nevertheless in itself a result of the efforts of the last few decades at dialogue. Further efforts will, one hopes, bring more fruits.

- Churches and Christians have to become involved in the field of coexistence and good neighborliness with people of another faith-in the “dialogue in community” or the “dialogue of life”-in order to discover commonalities in relation to what sustains and guides the lives of all human beings. Religions contain a potential of divine guidance which can be made fruitful for the coexistence of people who belong to different faiths. Agreement is needed on what people feel is morally binding for them. Here the opponents, not the advocates, of dialogue have to justify their attitude. It is human nature to talk to one another. There would have to be very good reasons for invalidating this law simply because people come here from other faiths and cultures. Theologically the issue is to make it plain specifically to Christians that even the world of other faiths does not stand outside the rule and blessing of God and that God as Sustainer and Lord is at work in them, just as conversely modern secularity can certainly become the stage for evil.
- In the sphere of religious experience, mysticism and spirituality premature harmonizations are questionable. Not only cultural variations but also far-reaching religious differences must be respected. This is precisely where inclusivist take-overs, such as are popular above all in New Age syncretism, are to be avoided. There are possibilities of interfaith or multi-faith prayer, but also limits to it. Where different kinds of spirituality encounter each other and a low value is placed on intellectual discourse, the “ability to distinguish” (1 Cor. 12:10) is a sine qua non. Of course, this is also helpful in discovering common features and learning from the sphere of other spiritualities for one’s own devotional life and for dealing with oneself. In a Christian world with a predominantly secular character, the encounter with other spiritualities is often the crucial experience of initiation into a religious life, and in some circumstances into a Christian life also.
- The answer of the Christian faith to the question of salvation differs even from Judaism’s. Within the great religions there are answers to the question of salvation which come very close to the Christian answer, and others farther removed from it. I find it hard to believe that God has issued so many different prescriptions against the same disease. Clearly there are abiding tensions here

which we have to live with. It is in connection with this soteriological issue that notions regarding the finality and uniqueness of Christ become important.

Because religions give different answers, and partly even have different questions, or at least frame the same questions differently, and because there are both common and divisive features, Christians nowadays need something like Christian guidance in religious pluralism, i.e. help to find their way about in the complex market of religious offers and promises. If this help is withheld from them, the only choice remaining for many of them is between unlimited openness (Gerhard Ebeling has described that kind of Protestant tolerance as a mixture of embarrassed confusion and sloppy thinking) and fundamentalist self isolation. Neither is desirable. Even interfaith dialogue should become a place for the reassurance of Christians and formation of a Christian identity. In the encounter with other modes of belief their own faith should become clearer and deeper.

The consequences for the churches and congregations are as follows:

- those of them still living unreflectively in a pre-pluralist church identity should receive help to deal with those of other faiths and to become mature Christians in modern religious pluralism;
- those who have been made to feel insecure, and whose identity has been endangered, should be preserved from the two extreme dangers of retreat into fundamentalist ghettos and fortresses on the one hand and helpless wandering around in religious relativism on the other;
- coexistence and good neighborliness with those of other faiths should be encouraged and put into practice; the preservation of religious peace, listening to the other and witnessing to the gospel (i.e., *convivencia*, dialogue and mission) should not be played off one against the other but understood equally as requirements of Christian love.

(Translated from the German by J. Greig)

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The Theological Challenges of the Encounter Between Christianity and Other Faiths in Europe

Hans Ucko

Does the title of this presentation imply the question whether a theology of religions or a theology of religious pluralism can be local, in our case European? Would the encounter with people of other faiths pose particular theological challenges for Europe, which would not be the same in other parts of the world? Are geographical borders or historical confines, such as those of Europe, laying the foundation for a particular theology of religion? Can geography be held responsible for the theology we have inherited? All this is of course linked to the question of context. We express today our faith through various theologies of contexts: black theology, Minjung theology, feminist theology, liberation theology, but do these theologies really and fundamentally give a very different outlook than the so-called traditional theology of the churches? Do theologies of context really challenge *basic* tenets of Christian theology? They give a very particular and necessary emphasis to theology in underlining perspectives that have been neglected or need to be stressed. They invoke the God of Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel and bring forth dimensions of womanhood, imperative for a world that seeks equality between men and women. They claim the liberating God of Exodus, who took a people out of slavery, and condemned the practices of racism and oppression. They quote the prophets of God and chastise the rule of oligarchy. And rightly so, for giving voice to the marginalized, to the oppressed and subdued, to cry out to heaven and to stand up with God for change, can only be for the better. But are theologies of context more than healing, and in the best sense of the word, therapeutic tools, namely a challenge to fundamental theological pre suppositions? One is inclined to think that theology has its own life, irrespective of mountains and valleys, fields and rivers, people, stories and histories of Europe or, for that matter, any other continent. Are the theological challenges of religious pluralism different for Christians in Aberdeen than they are for those in Taipei?

One thing does single out European theology from among other theologies. European theology is powerful theology and has been exported to every corner of the world, where it has addressed every Christian and built every church. European theology has become, and still is regarded by very many, as the very litmus paper of theological authenticity. European theology must give its “kosher” stamp to any theology.

But European theology has not always been powerful and mighty, although it has forgotten its humble origins. Its origins are the heritage from Jerusalem and Athens, where Jews and Gentiles, attracted by the Jew from Nazareth, developed a theology or an understanding about a God who sought to make Jews and Greeks, men and women, slaves and free, one in the Messiah or Christ. This theology was a theology of a minority, because Christians were a minority and, because its roots belonged to the tradition of the Jewish people, also a minority. Their grand

theological claims molded, through confession and worship, the first Christians from Jews and Gentiles into something new. Their spirits were raised by these claims, their morale was boosted, all in preparation of the *parousia*, the return of Christ. And although this theology was lived out in Europe, it did not become European until it had gained power. Power is an intrinsic part of theology in Europe. The era of Constantine ushered in power and made European theology difficult to imagine separated from its enormous success, first in Europe and then throughout the world. It laid the foundation for Western or European civilization, it educated people in Europe and throughout the world, provided schools and hospitals and organized society. Very little has really been able to challenge European theology.

Religious pluralism could not challenge theology in Europe as long as the church was in control of society. The Enlightenment, the French Revolution, industrialization and the ensuing secularization questioned the role of the church and launched attacks against its power and influence. In this continuing siege the Christian *Festung Europa* was weakened and its malaise and uneasiness began and continue to this very day. There is some truth to the title of Marc Reuver's forthcoming book, *A Requiem for Constantine*. An era is dying. We all know it, but dare we at all face it? We prefer to emulate the ostrich, but *vestigia terrent*. There are many examples of a church and theology in uneasiness. Never before, for instance, has the language of the church been so much impregnated by apologetics, the self-defense of the church and ourselves, or its reverse, the other side of the coin, the evangelizing crusades and blaring proclamations. In spite of its offensive language, it is a response in the same defensive mood. Krister Stendahl is right: apologetics, that is the devil for the church.

Another illustration of this malaise is when theology becomes utilitarian and the Christian witness is presented in such ways as to suggest that there is a gain to be made, that it will actually pay off to become a Christian. Some years ago a film was shown in Denmark with the title: "Give God a break on Sunday." The title seemed to recommend that people put their "money" on God with a chance of winning the jackpot. If you invest in God, you will get something out of it. *Do ut des*.

A third illustration is the proclamation of Europe as a Christian home and the dreams to reestablish bygone days through a decade of evangelism. Europe, a Christian continent from the Atlantic to the Ural. But Europe is not the cradle of any of our world religions, not even of Christianity. It adopted Christianity and it became the Christian continent *par excellence*. It conquered the different indigenous religious traditions in Europe, it locked up Judaism in a ghetto and managed, although with difficulty, to throw Islam out of Spain and keep it at bay on its eastern flank. It may indeed seem as if Europe were the Christian continent. And yet, both Jews and Muslims have contributed to that which we call Europe. But Christians had the power and turned Europe into a European Christian home. Jews and Muslims, who had also been building Europe, are still waiting to experience the vision of Isaiah: "They will build houses and dwell in them; ... No longer will they build houses and others live in them" (Isa. 65:21-22). Today the time may have come for the church to welcome Jews and Muslims home into a truly religiously plural Europe, doing so with repentance and towards a rethinking of a Christian theology informed by history, a history of Jews and Muslims and people of other faiths in Europe.

When so doing, it is important to let Judaism and Islam speak in their own right without Christian interpretation. Judaism has suffered in Europe from Christian interpretation, from not being allowed to define itself. This is the case whenever Christians talk about Judeo-Christian culture, tradition, heritage, etc. Although both Jews and Muslims have contributed to the formation of Europe,

Christian theology has not allowed Judaism to have its own say. Judaism was subsumed under the name of the Judeo Christian tradition, which meant that Christian theology spoke for both the Jewish and the Christian parts in that which was called Judeo-Christian. The wording "Judeo Christian" does not leave very much room for Judaism in its own right. It is Judaism dressed in Christian garb. It was Judaism according to Christianity. It is in this way that it is said to have influenced European culture. The Jewish tradition has had difficulties recognizing itself in that which is portrayed as the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Christianity and Islam have been in contact for over fourteen centuries and the history of Christian-Muslim encounter is highly complex. Inherited ideas, images and stereotypes, mostly negative, have marked and continue to mark mutual perceptions. Christians have often perceived Islam as a political, economic and theological threat, and have painted Islam in a negative hue, in contrast to their own positive self-image. The mass media continue, with few exceptions, to perpetuate these images. Turks are perceived as a threat, Arabs are potential terrorists. In the encounter of Muslims and Christians, Muslims invariably feel compelled first to disavow labels put on them. There is a pervasive feeling of denigration which often makes the encounter more of a disputation, where the Muslim is on the defensive. Christians seem unable to see Islam in its diversity. Islam is a monolithic block. What is called Muslim fundamentalism is taken for the real image of Islam. The Muslim contribution to European culture is easily forgotten. Muslims are not identified with art and poetry, mathematics and philosophy. The ordinary European was astonished to find that Bosnians could actually be Muslims and yet look like almost any other European.

It could seem as if Jews and Muslims alone challenged theology in Europe. This is of course not the case. There is a religious pluralism that goes beyond the tradition of Abraham and Sarah. On November 5, 1968, the monks of the Rikon community in Switzerland celebrated the final ritual of the dedication of the Tibetan Institute with the aim of providing a monastic focal point in liturgy and prayer for Tibetans living in exile in Switzerland and to be of assistance to anyone in the West interested in Tibetan Buddhism.

At a recent European Christian-Buddhist meeting in Zug, Switzerland, the majority of the participants were Christians looking for spiritual renewal, meaning and relevance. Some of them did not know any longer what to call themselves. Were they Zen Christians, Christian Zen, Buddhist Christians or Christian Buddhists? There was no flippancy about their spiritual search. There was a silent agreement that Christianity no longer could satiate their spiritual hunger and thirst.

There are people of other faiths in Europe and there are Europeans of Christian origin and traditions who have difficulties finding themselves at home in the life of the churches. Instead they go on a pilgrimage to other religious traditions. These new forms of religious plurality challenge our theological thinking. And yet, these are marginal phenomena in comparison with the agnostic Europe. Theology ought

to be more intentionally concerned with this different face of Europe. Secularization has marked this continent. Its world is a world which no longer needs the working hypothesis “God” to make sense of reality and to solve problems of human life. It is the withdrawal of life itself from any religious or metaphysical control and the attempt to understand and live without asking for any particular coherence, let alone a world-view. Secularization is manifold, it is religious indifference and it is alienation from religious language. The language of theologians has become nonsense, revealing no meaning. The language of the Bible remains obscure. Howard Jacobson gives quite an example of this alienation in his book, *The Very Model of a Man*:

The Lord was our shepherd. We did not want. He fed us in green and fat pastures, gave us to drink from deep waters, made us to lie in a good fold. That which was lost, He sought; that which was broken, He bound up; that which was driven away, He brought again into the flock. **Excellent, excellent, had we been sheep.**¹

This is more than a text revealing problems people of the cities might have in understanding the language of peasants and shepherds. Here is expressed the predicament of many in Europe. The religious language finds no echo or response. How does theology in Europe respond to an aspect of religious pluralism, namely the absence of any easily defined religious tradition, and yet so pervasive that it cannot be discarded but must be taken seriously and as one very important factor in the religious landscape of Europe? Arend van Leeuwen writes in his *Christianity in World History*:

The Christian faith in the modern world will lose more and more of its redeeming power and will become more and more evidently a salt which has lost its savor, unless it can summon up the courage “blasphemous” or not-to risk facing the hazardous encounter with the very “atheism” and “nihilism” which the preaching of the gospel has itself produced. That is the “needle’s eye” through which the theology of the twentieth century must pass if it is to enter the kingdom of God.²

What are then the challenges posed to theology in Europe by this religious pluralism? First of all to realize and affirm that religions, including Christianity, have a tendency to become an end in themselves, to substitute themselves, although unconsciously, for God in a way that there is nothing that is more likely to obscure the face of God than religion. S.T. Coleridge formulated it in his own way already in 1831:

He who begins by loving Christianity better than Truth, will proceed by loving his own sect or church better than Christianity, and end by loving himself better than all.

Then there is the challenge to renounce the pretension of being the only abode of God on earth and to be content with being the abode of humans, inspired by the

¹ G. Jacobson, *The Very Model of Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1993), 1.

² A. Van Leeuwen, *Christianity in World History* (London/ Edinburgh: Edinburgh House Press, 1964), 414.

same image of God humans hold together, being an open home towards that which is beyond. The outer conditions for such a *teshuvah* or conversion of European theology are there. It is much more difficult for someone in power to be humble. Although the church by no means is powerless in Europe, it has lost its hold on people. Holding on to a power it no longer has will drain even more the force and strength it needs to understand and interpret its calling and finally to find its new role in Europe.

Religious Pluralism Challenges Our Reading of the Bible

There is a midrash on Psalm 8 which might illuminate this point. The psalm begins in praise of God:

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.

The psalm ends in a similar way, but not entirely:

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

The last phrase of the verse is not repeated: "You have set your glory above the heavens." The rabbis asked themselves of course, why this was so, and this midrash was born.

Angels were singing their praise of God and could not understand how God could give to someone created, a human being like Moses, the word of God. It should not be given to earth. It should stay in heaven: The word of God is a glory above the heavens. The name of God is already present on earth through creation itself. There was no need to give Moses the word of God, the heavenly glory. God asked Moses to give reasons why he should receive the word of God. And Moses asked the angels if they had been brought out of Egypt. The angels said no. Then Moses asked them if they had other gods before God. The angels said no. Then Moses asked them if they needed to remember to honor their parents, and the angels said no. Did they need a commandment not to murder? The angels said no. Well, said Moses, then you will understand why you don't need the word of God in heaven, but why in spite of everything it is very much needed on earth. God praised Moses and the angels had to agree. That is why they did not insist any more that the word of God should remain in heaven and that is why the psalm is concluded differently from how it began:

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Although we maintain that the Bible is not in the same genre as a timetable or a cookery book, where every minute or every measure of the different ingredients matter, we continue to treat the Bible as an encyclopedia of the innermost thinking of God and the most detailed plans of God. The concept "salvation history," which presents the intersections of God with humanity, reads like a timetable or a recipe

in a cookery book. Although we dissociate ourselves from any chiliastic speculation as to the second coming of Christ or the precise days and hours of Armageddon, we nevertheless seek to extract from the Bible certain precise teachings about God, which in fact seem to limit God's freedom of movement. There seems to be an underestimation of the ontological references in the Bible, forgetting that the Bible is a mode of being, a mode, which is to help us to go beyond ourselves, how to sojourn here on earth without thinking that we are the proprietors, how to make this world grow, to multiply without worshipping it. What we actually should be looking for is therefore not a theology, in the sense of fixed claims of truth, nor a theosophy, in the sense of an intellectual knowledge about God, but a praxis, whereby we in our encounter with the Bible are less concerned with what this divinely inspired text might tell us about the divine, but more concerned with what this text might signify for us as human beings. Consequently, the Bible is not there to provide us with answers. It is not there to appease our anxiety and doubt. It is there to lead beyond that which we believe, to make sure that there is no pride, premature satisfaction or lull in that which is. Reading the Bible belongs less in the category of belief, but much more in the life of reflection, meditation, contemplation. The very meaning of reflection is to go beyond, without insisting on absolute or total transparency.

Expressing ourselves today theologically therefore calls for a new mode of theologizing, which is not in the form of a propositional theology, but in the form of a poetic theology. The vocabulary of faith belongs to the different dimensions of story-telling. When a story is told, everyone knows that one's whole self is taken into the story. A story addresses neither the intellectual perspective alone, nor the emotional perspective only, but all different dimensions of being human. A story is told not only for verifying, affirming, confessing and believing, but to call forth the human within us. One wouldn't dream of making dogmas or theoretical propositions out of stories. Stories are of another kind. Stories are not fairy tales but expressions on every level of what it actually means to be a human being. Stories demand our intellectual, emotional, rational and intuitive reactions. We are approached as human beings, as the ones we basically are. Only in story-telling can truth be absolute and relative at the same time. It is only in this dimension that there is only one way to salvation, and yet there are as many ways to salvation as there are human beings dreaming about salvation. It would be impossible to proclaim the one way the same way one does when telling someone which way to take to reach the city center.

It seems that a discussion on a theology of religions based on what we can extract from our reading of the Bible leads us astray. Hans-Ruedi Weber is right when saying in his foreword to Wesley Ariarajah's book, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths*:

One could easily make a strong case showing that according to the Bible God has nothing to do with people of other faiths. In order to support this view one would simply have to pick out of their context passages such as Hosea's condemnation of Canaanite fertility cults or some exclusivist sayings of Jesus in John's Gospel. By

using similar proof-texting the opposite affirmation also could be made, namely that God has much to teach us through God's presence among people of other faiths.³

It is therefore useless to argue from the Bible how God looks upon people of other faiths. There is no room for defining the other nor elaborating categories of relativism, inclusivism or exclusivism. It is equally out of place to profess that everyone is saved as it was to quote: *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. We need a poetic theology also when speaking about soteriology, Christology and ecclesiology. Only if our theories of pluralism express something which is greater than the form in which it is expressed, can they be useful for our reflection and meditation. Salvation is not one and only one thing and should not be streamlined into a word, a phrase, a feeling or a concept. The divine is greater and every religious life is specific, something which makes my neighbor's life and mine specific too. Faith is not static. Change, flux and transformation are the normalcy. We should not accept a theology of religions and thereby accept the status quo.

Religious plurality challenges the churches to develop a theology of pluralism as something God-given and as having a positive value. In dialogue we are often tempted for the sake of mutual understanding to surround ourselves, as it were, with a horizon of unity. Can we acknowledge also the difference among religions and see their differences as positive, and not at once as complementary, trying to find how religions differ from each other, yet somehow hang together? Are we ready to face difference as something God given? With a theology affirming plurality, we would have come a long way from a theology of contempt of the other, to borrow from Jules Isaac, who coined the phrase: *l'enseignement du mepris*. But we have also come away from a state of tolerance, towards a theology which calls for mutual respect and preparedness for mutual change. Should not tolerance be enough? Paul Claudel once said: "*Pour cela, nous avons des maisons de tolerance*" (houses of ill-repute, tolerated by the authorities). You don't really accept, you tolerate, because there is no other way. We need more than mere tolerance. If we can go beyond tolerance, genuine, mutual respect of the differences will be assured and the excitement of a mutual understanding of change will become possible.

Leaving religions to be dissimilar to our own, even if they were compatible, does not give us a right to co-opt them into our own categories or conceive a Christian end. Their difference is maybe more important than anything else and part of the providential. The different religious traditions are not like ours. We may in the end need not only a theology of affirmation but more a theology of difference.

Religious Pluralism Challenges Our Christology

St. John of Damascus said: "God is unknowable and in comprehensible. The only thing knowable and comprehensible about God is his unknowability and his

³ Wesley Ariarajah, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths*, (Geneva: WCC Risk Series No. 26, 1994), ix.

incomprehensibility.” These words of one of the great church fathers are today probably more alive in contexts outside the church than inside the church. Outside the church, in the Jewish tradition, the name of God remains unpronounceable. The unpronounceable Tetragrammaton secures a God who remains God, different from humans, impossible to grasp. Among the 100 names of Allah, only 99 are known. There is a wisdom in the Muslim tradition, saying that God remains God. People outside the church seem to prefer that some space is given, not all is said, not all revealed. The person Jesus still fascinates people, his life and death are seen as a model for humankind. The life of the Sermon on the Mount is seen as the ideal life, a life that would maybe lead to peace and human dignity. God however is supposed to remain God. Total transparency is shunned. It seems however that the Christian tradition has had difficulties living with a God, who is vaguely outlined and ill-defined. The Christian tradition had to spell out the Tetragrammaton, although it got mixed up in the vowels and ended up in the misnomer Jehovah. The Second Article of the Creed has been used to give firm outlines to God, to give God the needed contours. God was Christ and Jesus was God : Basta! The lordship of Christ is certainly one of the central affirmations in the New Testament, but the way in which it was expressed is a contribution of Europe to world Christianity. It is an expression of European power to prescribe to the world and to world religions that the way to God passes through the Christian understanding of God. One wonders how Christology would have looked, had it seen the light of day in India, where religious pluralism has been and is more significant than it probably ever was in Europe. In confessing the lordship of Christ, there is a development from theocentrism to Christocentrism and sometimes to a pure “Christomonism,” where Christ is allowed to exhaust God, something totally incompatible with the evidence of the New Testament and its Jewish context. Christians have in Christomonism sometimes succumbed to the dangers of a personality cult, where the underlying fact that “God is all in all” has been almost lost sight of, says Stanley Samartha. When Christ is allowed to exhaust God, the possibilities for God to relate to people of other faiths diminish. Bible verses can be taken to confirm that there is only one way to God, through Christ. The Way is used to exclude other ways. It is as someone has said: “We took all we knew about God and dumped it on Jesus.” But Jesus himself is very well aware that the Father knows more and has the present and future in total transparency. In our Christological pilgrimage we need to go back to the marginal Jew, Jesus, to learn about his way to God. We have to go back to the First Article to leave room for God in our theology of other religions. We have to realize that we don’t have one Christology but several already in the New Testament. We have to see which of these is more compatible with a theocentric theology and possible in a world of many faiths. It is again possible that the reality of the church in Europe today in this new phase of history, where power is no longer an option, can help theology to formulate a Christology that can live with people of other faiths and religious plurality.

Religious Plurality Challenges Our Theology of Faith and Spirituality

In my ministry as a pastor in the Church of Sweden, I was concerned about the pastoral theology of baptism. The baptism of small children came with an automatism that did not correspond to church attendance. Baptism was requested by almost every family that had had a baby. In most cases I had never seen the parents before in church. I made it a point to go home to the parents to clarify the meaning of baptism and to explain the ritual itself. I remember one such visit very clearly. After my explanation of the sacrament of baptism, I encouraged them to ask anything about what we were to celebrate together. There was silence. After some minutes of embarrassment, the father of the little baby asked if they could take photos. Before I could react to the fact that my explanation had apparently been all in vain, since this was the only question they had, he pushed an ashtray over to my side of the table and said: “We have heard that you also smoke.” At that time I realized that this was his way of pleading with me to become what he was, to be a human being, to be with him in this hour of fatherhood and to give him the moment of cosmic significance that he was asking from the church. He did not ask for the sacrament baptism, what it meant, he asked for a door to be opened to the divine, that he could express his immense joy and his immense anxiety for the future of his child.

This experience told me that there is a spirituality out there in Europe, which has nowhere to go and which has no language. It doesn't understand the language of the church. But this doesn't mean that there is no spirituality, only it shuns the religious language of the church. People are afraid to use this language, because they are afraid that the church might co-opt them and because they have a feeling that there is no room for that which is better left unsaid. Even the most unlearned people know that the truly important matters of life are those for which we have no words. Yet, we must speak of them. We speak, as it were, around them, under them, through them, but not directly of them. To possess these words would maybe mean to comprehend the awesome mysteries of creation and death, and such comprehension might well make life impossible. We have been given a riddle rather than the revealing word.

In Europe, today, we are faced with a religiosity that is very difficult to define. It has parts of Christian spirituality and faith, and yet it does not want to be locked up in the language or the life of the church. There is a kind of syncretism that holds on to the rites of the churches but has its own understanding of the ceremonies of baptism, confirmation, marriage. There is a need to reflect on the phenomenon of syncretism. Is syncretism only a bad word or is syncretism the living dialogue going on inside all persons of faith in their journeying in religiosity? It seems to be a fact that people today are believing rather than holding on to a set of beliefs, that there is a pilgrimage in religiosity. It seems that for people “believing” is more important than “belief”! There is a quest for something which is beyond. Once we have realized this, we cannot as easily characterize the secularized world as atheistic. We should instead learn to affirm values of the secular. There is not

as much atheism as we believe. Instead it seems as if it is inside the churches that there is a lack of faith. Mainstream churches seem unable to cope with the phenomenon of religiosity. Are the churches prepared to learn from the actual dialogue in life? Maybe our model should be much more how the people really live their religious life. The elite is not necessarily the model.

Rituals and liturgies are needed in every society. Through their structures they bring about substantial transformations in human experience. Rituals express something that we cannot capture, that is bigger than that which we can fathom. *Deus semper maior*, God is always greater. We approach through these rituals the transcendent throughout our life and we need someone to give these moments their dignity. In our European societies, the church is often the master of ceremony. It is so because there was no other in those days, when the church was the only voice. Now the church is left holding the baby. The church is expected to remain the master of ceremony. How are we to theologize this role of the church? How can we be attentive to the double nature of the church, of being a master of ceremony for the people, holding the key to the cosmos or the divine in our hands, and at the same time being the koinonia of the disciples of Jesus? How do we reflect upon the fact that the religiously plural world and the agnostic Europe need institutions, churches, temples, synagogues, mosques, gurdwaras to celebrate birth and death and the transformation of life?

Are there theological challenges particular to Europe? Europe used to be a Christian continent, where power and theology intersected and interacted. The majority of the peoples in Europe were Christian and there was no need to make the distinctions between Christians as one does today, when we have to differentiate between those who only are Christian in name and those who are practicing Christians. We are left with this heritage. Our theology is a theology built upon totally different parameters than the ones we have today. The church has been dethroned and is not the only authoritative voice today. The church is no longer the only one on the market. Other voices are heard, of other religions, of humanism, of agnosticism, of atheism. Europe is a continent where the majority will in some ways continue to be Christian, and in other ways the church will have to learn what it means to be in a minority.

From Hans Ucko, "The Theological Challenges of the Encounter Between Christianity and Other Religions in Europe" in *Christianity and Other Faiths in Europe*, ed. Corinna Ascher (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1995), 99-118.

Christian Theology and Mission in the Midst of Many Theologies and Missions

Israel Selvanayagam

The Challenge of Religious Pluralism

The Christian Church throughout its history has faced many challenges and found answers, sometimes more satisfactory ones and at other times less satisfactory ones. The first church council (commonly called the Jerusalem Council) met in Jerusalem to deal with the question of prescribing the necessary rules and regulations of the Jewish religious tradition for the gentile converts. The decisions were characterized by a middle path relaxing the rigidity of the tradition but suggesting the basic minimum requirements. This was a correct solution for the council which claimed to have the approval of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28). The other major challenge in the early history of the church was the upsurge of “heretical teachings.” The solution included a variety of measures ranging from persecuting the “heretics” to formulating creeds. Then came the great schism of the 11th century that divided the Church into Western and Eastern, or Roman Catholic and Orthodox. Further, the challenges of the Renaissance led to the Reformation. Specific theological positions contributed to the development of different denominations which in turn resulted in a kind of missionary competition and confusion. The emergence of unending new movements and groups added to the complexity of the problem of a divided Church, and this has been the main concern of the ecumenical movement. The ecumenical movement in its various forms continues to define its nature, broaden its scope and clarify its function. In recent years, along with the individual churches, it has been facing many challenges such as those posed by secularism, the voices of the oppressed, international enmity and war, environmental disasters, conflicting economies and so on. In response, there have been a number of consultations, and many documents with theological-biblical reflections were produced.

Religious pluralism has been one of the most challenging issues confronting the Christian church. The age-long affirmation of the decisiveness of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ and its universal significance is being questioned, as well as the ambiguous ways in which the Christian mission has been carried out over the centuries. Mission has been particularly criticized for its association with colonial expansion and its role in damaging traditional cultures. Furthermore, in the process of communicating the gospel, Christians have many times violated one of the Ten Commandments by bearing false witness against their neighbors of other faiths. Now that the Christian domination in the world is weakening and the world religions and traditional cultures are becoming stronger, their representatives come and tell us, to our great embarrassment, “You are wrong!”. Such criticism is apt to make the average, sensitive Christian quite nervous and distressed.

However, many Christians still continue the traditional pattern of doing mission. Some are intensifying their efforts to communicate the Christian message to people of other faiths and to convert them to Christianity. Such attempts cannot be condemned outright because the Christian faith is a kerygmatic faith and because Christians have a mandate enshrined in the Great Commission, i.e., “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:19). But what these enthusiastic evangelical Christians have failed to recognize *is* that this mandate has been formulated or revised in different ways in the New Testament and in the prediction of Jesus that the Holy Spirit would guide his disciples “into all truth.” For example, according to Mark, the disciples should go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation (16:15). For Luke, repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached to all nations (24:47). His version in Acts puts *it* as “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem ... and to the ends of the earth” (1:8). Such formulations are multiplied and thus provide new dimensions and emphases (as also in the fourth Gospel and in the Epistles). The point here is that it is not proper to stick to only one formulation of the missionary mandate.

More significantly, those who originally received the mandate did not expect a challenge from other world religions. For instance, there *is* no clue in the New Testament about the existence of such Eastern religious traditions as Hinduism, Buddhism or Jainism. The first disciples never expected the emergence, five centuries later, of Islam with a claim for finality and for correction of the Christian beliefs. They had no idea that a synthetic religion such as Sikhism would appear, combining the Hindu idea of the human person and the Muslim idea of one God. Neither did they expect the reconstruction of the Jewish religious tradition in the 20th century (when the anti-Semitic attitude of Christians would cause the misinterpretation of the Hebrew Scripture and terrors such as the holocaust). Some of these religions are vigorous in mission work and call to Christians to join them. All these challenges are new to us and there is no single solution for them. In a sense, we are quite awed by the fact that also people of other faiths have a high sense of commitment to one God and the welfare of humanity. If we continue to uphold the validity of the Christian faith and if we feel the need of sharing it with others while admitting the errors we committed in the past-what then should be our response and new approach to people of other faiths?

Different Kinds of Responses

A majority of Christians have chosen not to understand other religions; or, if they know a few things about them, they ridicule their claim and preach them the gospel. They are not paying heed to Max Müller’s words “He who knows one knows none.” One reason for this position is their secret fear that knowing other religions will destabilize their Christian faith. But some missionaries overcame this fear and studied other religious traditions; thus they equipped themselves for fruitful interaction with the adherents of the traditions concerned. In most cases, although the initial aim was “to understand the enemy for a strategic action,” the attempt ended with a pioneering work some of which later became part of the

scientific study of religion or comparative religion. There are theologians who have found this study enriching for Christian theology and necessary for correcting the Christian approach to people of other faiths.

The history of changing Christian approaches to people of other faiths, philosophies and ideologies is a long one. However, the most intensive discussions on the Christian attitude to the world religions have taken place in the 20th century. They began with the first missionary encounters with resurgent religions at the beginning of this century; for instance, in 1910, at the first International Missionary Conference in Edinburgh. They continued in many forms and at various levels. It will be helpful to acknowledge the threefold theological model that emerged, i.e., that of *exclusivism*, *inclusivism* and *pluralism*. Before arguing for a more pluralistic approach to religious pluralism, let me point out different positions within each of its parts.

There are crude forms and mild forms of *exclusivism*. For example, there are Christians who find that adherents of other religions have no other use than to fuel the fires of hell. Others suggest that they are not that important, as the fuel is eternally in stock and that they will suffer in hell for ever. For both, even what good is to be found in other religions must be seen as an emanation of the devil. There are others still who hold that whatever may be good in other religions, the divine revelation is only in and through Jesus Christ. For them, Jesus is the only way, name, and truth leading to salvation. While partly sharing this position, some take pains to explain the meaning of this affirmation in the biblical context and in relation to people of other faiths. For example, they point out that the way of Jesus is neither easy nor a shortcut but one of suffering. While they feel they are committed to this way, which has a universal appeal, their commitment by no means leads them to belittle outright similar commitments found among people of other faiths. They think that commitment to Jesus' way goes well with an openness for other ways.

The *inclusive* model has found a variety of expressions. Clement of Alexandria spoke of *logos spermatikos* by which he meant that the seeds of the Word or the rays of the Light are present in all religions and philosophies. Thomas Aquinas suggested accepting the concept of reincarnation. In the modern period, Christ, or Christianity, has been seen by many as the crown of all religions, fulfilling all aspirations and being law for all. Some have seen Christ as unknown or hidden in religions, receiving all genuine devotion and stimulating liberation. The belief in the cosmic presence of Christ has led a few to declare a sort of anonymous Christianity. There are those who replace Christ with kingdom of God which is an all-inclusive framework accepting all glories and good values wherever they are to be found. In all these expressions, the name of the hidden power or reality is still Christ or kingdom of God. This could be seen as a subtle and indirect form of exclusivism.

There are also the *pluralists*. For them, all religions are essentially similar and equally valid. This is a typical Hindu position, but in the West it is termed a Copernican revolution in theology of religions. This position ridicules as a myth any claim for uniqueness. While there is no consensus on the essence of all religions, the pluralists have yet to explain whether all religions known in history, with all their

aspects, are part of their scheme or only a selection. They also seem to fall short of a comprehensive view of the religions, which would take into consideration all dimensions of religious life, including the various forms of rituals, as they tend to reduce religion to an ethical principle. According to some, each religion projects only one aspect of the Ultimate Truth and all these partial projections must be put together in order to get the complete picture. The usual illustration of this is the popular Buddhist folk tale of the six blind men who are sensing with their fingertips different parts of an elephant. But what is the common character of all the parts? Do they know what the whole elephant is like? Questions such as these have not been answered convincingly.

Without elaborating further on the threefold model of religious pluralism, let me make some short remarks. First, such a model is not exclusively a Christian achievement. It can be found in other religions as well, particularly in Hinduism. Second, all those who seriously believe in one God cannot but grapple with the question of relating the different God experiences and expressions to one God. Third, replacing God with Christ has caused confusion, as Christ is originally a Jewish figure or concept and one of the many titles ascribed to Jesus. Fourth, ignoring the irreconcilable differences between religions and ridiculing their fundamental affirmations as exclusive or triumphalist has led to another kind of absolutism. Particularly the pluralists are guilty of this pitfall. Fifth, if we take the different types of religious people we meet in flesh and blood, it is difficult to be content with one of the above models. The way one religion relates to the other is not the same in every case. Christianity's relationship, for instance, with Judaism and Islam is not the same as that with Hinduism. Also, we meet religious people with a variety of positions within a religion ranging from nominalism to fanaticism. Therefore, a pluralistic approach which depends on the particular religion under consideration and on the particular religious person we encounter seems to be more appropriate. Sixth, several of those who uncritically exalt other religions and criticize Christianity, particularly the pluralists, express no sympathy for the missionary obligation of Christians, which is fundamental to their faith. They seem to exempt Christians deliberately from their "equal respect for all religions." Whereto we are moving is not always clear. Here I suggest a review of the original foundation of our theology and mission.

Insights Gained from the Early Christian Approaches

Jesus and his disciples lived in a context which was religiously different from ours. However, what they said and did at some crucial moments gives us clues for a proper understanding of theology and mission in today's multifaith situations. The fundamental openness exercised by Jesus can speak volumes. More specifically, he recognized faith beyond the boundaries of his religious tradition. He appreciated the "faith" of a Roman centurion (Mt. 8:10), a Canaanite woman (15:28) and a Samaritan (Lk. 17:19) all outsiders demonstrating an extraordinary ability to transcend the status quo and the customary norms, something which was absent from his own tradition of (believers). Don't we see people of such extraordinary faith among the Hindus, Muslims, Jews and Buddhists today?

The Book of Acts, which is known as the first handbook on mission and the work of the Holy Spirit, portrays some striking aspects of the early church's expression of God, Jesus and its approach to outsiders. Of course, the mission which was authenticated by dramatic signs and wonders is not the point of our immediate concern here; nor are the references to the Hebrew scriptures as foretelling the advent of Jesus. Rather we will point out a few instances of missionary behavior and look at the content of some of the preaching. We have to look at them afresh and clean our glasses of doctrinal and denominational stains.

Peter's Pentecostal sermon has the following notes: Jesus of Nazareth was a man attested by God with mighty works and wonders (2:22). He was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men, but God raised him and made him both Lord and Christ (2:23). Repentance and forgiveness of sins was mentioned as the hearers' response (2:38).

The verse 4:12 ("no other name") is frequently quoted as the surest clue for an exclusive claim. But a preliminary exegesis of this verse reveals that the context was not a discussion on religious pluralism but the question was in whose name a lame man was brought to sound health or salvation. The name was not taken as magical, but as a personal characterization converted into liberative action. The language was one of love, echoing a sense of caress and liturgy. In the same context Peter says that the God of the forefathers glorified his servant Jesus who was holy, righteous and the author of life (3:13-15). The call is again for repentance which will lead to forgiveness, refreshing and coming from the presence of the Lord, so that he may send the Messiah appointed for them, Jesus (3:19,20). After the arrest, when Peter and John were freed, the band of disciples lifted their voices to God, the sovereign Lord, the creator, who had anointed his servant Jesus (4:24,27). Further, in the council also Peter and the apostles said, "The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed ... God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (5:30,31).

Stephen, in his defensive speech narrating the story of Israel, told the Jewish audience that Jesus the Righteous One was coming in the longline of prophets who had been persecuted by their fathers. At the time of his death, Stephen "gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God," (7:55), and prayed "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit ... Lord do not hold this sin against them" (7:59-60).

Paul met Jesus in a mysterious way as the living Lord, but vulnerable, in solidarity with his persecuted followers. The change in Paul was marked by a radical shift from persecuting Jesus to suffering for the sake of his name (9:4-6,18). He proclaimed Jesus as the Son of God (9:20). His initial zeal led him to go about in Jerusalem and to preach boldly in the name of the Lord. "And he spoke and argued with the Hellenists" (9:29).

It stands to reason to call Peter's initial hesitation and further decision to visit Cornelius the second conversion of an evangelist. This conversion led him further to declare, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (10:34,35). Of

course he does not finish here but adds, “You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, peace by Jesus Christ ... how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him ... God raised him ... He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (10:36-43).

Paul in his preaching to the Jews claimed that at a point in God’s continued dealings with them a message of salvation was sent through Jesus who was unjustly killed; but God raised him from the dead fulfilling his promise to the ancestors. Through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed and by him everyone who believes is set free from all those sins from which they could not be freed by the law of Moses (13:23-43). When this message was rejected, Paul turned to the Gentiles. But he continued to talk to Jews wherever he met them and everywhere his message to the Jewish audience was “The Messiah is Jesus” (17:3, 18:5,28).

In Lystra, following the miraculous healing of a crippled man and the local people’s declaration that Paul and Barnabas were gods in human form, Paul said,

Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing goodgiving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy (14:15-18).

This message is essentially Jewish and there is no mention of Jesus. The apostles entrusted the believers to the Lord and appointed elders for them in every church (14:23). As we have already noted, the first church council met in Jerusalem to discuss the question of prescribing the Jewish customs for the Gentile converts. The council was not rigid but generous showing a spirit of openness even in the midst of hectic missionary activities.

Paul’s speech before the Areopagus at Athens is most remarkable. He affirms the universal acts of God as creator, life-giver, sustainer, and companion of all human beings while he denounces limiting God to an idol or temple (17:24-30). Then he adds, “While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (17:30,31). The response was varied.

We read of Paul *arguing* with people, both with Jews and Gentiles, particularly the religious leaders and scholars (17:2, 18:4, 19:8,9). The mood and matter of these arguments is not clear. There are a few clues: “... argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer” (17:2); “[he] argued persuasively about the kingdom of God” (19:8). From these indications we can infer that Paul’s (and other apostles’ too) basic framework was

still Jewish, one universal God and his reign, and that the new horizon was marked by the Jesus factor. The recurring call was” ... repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus” (20:21). The ministry received from the Lord Jesus was to testify to the gospel of the grace of God (20:25). In other words it was, like Jesus, preaching the kingdom (20:24) and those who responded were commended to God and to the message of his grace which was able to build them up (20:32).

That the message at times was misunderstood was unavoidable and there were moments when it was twisted for selfish ends. For example, in Philippi the healing of a slave girl who had the spirit of divination adversely affected the gain of her owners. Paul and Silas were taken to court with the accusation that “These men are disturbing our city, they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe” (16:20,21). In Thessalonica, they were criticized for turning the Roman world upside down; that they were acting against the decrees of the Caesar, saying that there was another king, Jesus (17:7). In Corinth the complaint was “This man is persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law” (18:13). In Ephesus the number of those converted affected the business of the silversmiths who made silver shrines of the goddess Artemis, and of the craftsmen (19:19-24). But it was noted that the apostles were neither sacrilegious nor blasphemous of the goddess (19:37). These examples show the socio-economic-political and religious implications of a positive response to the gospel although the apostles never offended anyone’s particular feelings or religious sentiments.

So far Paul had missed no chance to preach the gospel. But there were new situations in which he changed his pattern, from preaching to being a witness. His last journey on a ship to Rome gives examples of this (ch. 27). Obviously the passengers of this ship were of many religions-there must have been Jews, Greeks and Romans-along with a few Christians who were accompanying Paul made prisoner and who was being taken to a final trial. Paul had already had foreseen that the voyage would end in damage and loss, not only of the ship and its cargo, but also of the passengers’ lives. He told the authorities but they paid no attention. Then a violent storm arose.

Paul came forward and pointed out that he had warned them. But he did not leave it at that. He asked them to take heart and told them that there would be no loss of life among them but only loss of the ship, according to a communication he had received from an angel of God the previous night. He asked them again to take heart as he had faith in God. On the fourteenth night, while the authorities were having secret consultations, Paul urged all to take some food as they had been starving for fourteen days. He encouraged them by saying that not a hair was to be lost from the head of any of them. Then he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat. All were encouraged and ate some food. However, a shipwreck could not be avoided. And even then, all escaped to an island because the centurion, wishing to save Paul, perhaps after getting a good impression about him in the turmoil, had thwarted a plan of the soldiers to kill all the prisoners.

After their escape, another interesting experience was awaiting them on the island, which was Malta. The natives were showing unusual kindness, kindling

a fire because it had begun to rain and it was cold (28:2). Thus, beyond verbal communication, the natives immediately turned into hosts and the strangers became their guests. A dramatic event followed. When Paul gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire a viper coming out of the heated sticks fastened on to his hand. According to the belief of the natives this was a sign that he was a murderer. But Paul shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. The people, finding that no misfortune happened to Paul, thought he was a god. The story ends with the chief of the island receiving the guests. Paul cures the chief's sick father by praying for him and for many others. The islanders give gifts to Paul and his party and put on board all that is needed.

Some Highlights and Implications for Today

From what we have observed in the Book of Acts and in the light of the multifaith context and its challenges today, we can make the following concluding remarks:

- Christian mission is based on the theological preamble that God is one, the creator and sustainer of all people. As long as we believe in one God we cannot say “our God” and “your God.” The acts of God are referred to in the history of Israel, but God's concern is for all people. He is the source of all goodness. God cannot be supposed to be like an image shaped by human craftsmanship and design, but he can be perceived by them in different ways.
- The exact relationship of God with the world religions is not clear. We have sure ground to believe that God is present in every religion, but he is not passive but active and even critical. Divine initiatives and human deviations, therefore, have to be acknowledged. Christianity is not an exception. Christians should have no problem in appropriating different experiences and expressions of God as long as they testify to God as the supreme being who is loving, just and compassionate. For example, Christians need not have any difficulty in proclaiming with the Muslims that God is great. If we relate all the genuine God experiences, we can realize with a sense of wonder that God is much greater than what we can imagine. Similarly, when some Hindu devotees sing that God and love are inseparable, we may well say “Amen.” But at the same time we may have genuine difficulties in incorporating peculiar myths and mythological formulations. We also may be bewildered when religions convey contradictory views of the world, the human personality and their vision of the future under one God who is too great for them. Therefore the above affirmations should not lead us to a compromise with regard to the greatness and love of God and the world view that *is* portrayed in the Bible and revealed in the life and death of Jesus unless we are convinced by something else that would call for a radical shift.
- The apostles understood that God had done something new in and through Jesus. It was a gift which was available for all. Further, they repeatedly proclaimed that

it was God who sent Jesus, ordained him, appointed him, raised him from the dead and made him Christ, Lord and Savior. For them Jesus never replaced God. In a mood of ecstasy and desperation Stephen and Paul saw Jesus as the risen Lord and prayed to him. Although they found value and meaning for their personal devotion in this experience, they never proposed a metaphysical theory nor *did* they build a cult around Jesus. The popular fundamentalist Christianity practicing and propagating a Jesus cult in fact represents a terrible deviation from the original perception. They seem to be uncomfortable with a general universal category such as God but want to maintain a separate identity with the name of Jesus. In South India I have seen writings on the walls taken from the Hebrew scripture in which the term "Lord" is replaced by "Jesus."

- Christ, Lord and Savior were titles ascribed to Jesus after his resurrection. These titles had direct appeal to the Jewish-Roman-Greek context. Repeating them in other contexts, without proper explanation, does not convey the meaning of Jesus and the gospel. Following is an attempt at clarification. Jesus as the Messiah did not fulfill all the Jewish expectations. He might still meet people's expectations in unexpected ways. And by perceiving Christ as a cosmic principle operating both before and after Jesus, Paul and other apostles provided the space for recognizing this principle in different ways in different cultures. Even if the name Christ is risked, it is for Christ 's sake. And when the early Christians proclaimed Jesus as the Lord, they indirectly implied that the Roman emperor was not the Lord. There is no clue for us to think that they viewed this Lord as identical with Yahweh, Adonai, the Lord of Lords. Jesus has been made Lord by God to bring authorities and powers under his crucified but not crusading authority. The divine presence is a new field of force in which Jesus, crucified and risen, remains the central referent. Likewise, Jesus is the saviour as expected particularly in some mystery religions. He is not simply the saviour of the soul, but the whole person and the whole universe.
- The later perception that Jesus was revealing God was not expressed in a single formula. In one sense Jesus was sent by God and in another the eternal word became flesh. A variety of imageries are used in the New Testament for explaining Jesus' relationship to God, such as son, heir, reflector, stamp, image and fullness. It is confusing to declare that Jesus is God using the formula of *homoousios* without admitting the long process involved in finding this formula and explaining the sense in which we use it. It is more modest to say that Jesus of Nazareth, a devout Jew and a prophet, after his resurrection, was confessed as Christ, Lord and Savior and still later perceived as revealing God, particularly God's suffering love. Even the Trinity doctrine cannot be the starting point as there is every danger of limiting the Son to his earthly life as Jesus of Nazareth while expounding the meaning of Trinity as a social being and reality, providing room for plurality with a balance. We should be generous in using all the images and titles of Jesus found in the New Testament and in explaining the relevance and meaning of each of them today. Similarly, the

idea of atonement is not mentioned in Acts, and again later it was one of the several meanings of the cross of Jesus.

- Today. Jesus is popularly seen as one of the many figures projected by the world religions. Without denouncing the other figures Christians are called to witness to the specific or decisive revelation of God in Jesus. According to the early apostles, God appointed Jesus through whom he will judge the world. In this sense Jesus becomes a normative figure for evaluating the quality of human life and the nature of divine love, but this norm is not contained in a set of laws and doctrines. Jesus continues to be normative for Christians in the sense that he provides most profound insights for a meaningful life. A meaningful life is not exhausted in the moral life of an individual but demonstrated in a community which seriously tries to follow Jesus in all aspects and in a spirit of openness.
- This last point is most significant. The judgement of God through Jesus starts in his household. While claiming that the divine mystery has been revealed in Jesus, the Christians have a long way to go to comprehend the depth, breadth, length and height of the love of God in Jesus (Eph 3:16ff.). They must prove to the world that they do not project and worship Jesus as a white tribal god but that they continue to bow down before the paradoxical Lamb, with its seven horns and seven eyes, which signifies on the one hand perfect authority and penetrating presence, and on the other stands as though slaughtered (Rev. 5:6; 13 :8), demonstrating vulnerability.
- Mission has not been the invention of certain Christian religious enthusiasts out of their sympathy for the world. It primarily defines the purpose of Christian existence, as a community, a church. In accordance with the mandate recorded in John's Gospel Christians are sent into the world in continuation of God's sending his Son Jesus into the world and empowered by his Spirit. Above all, Christians are called to participate in God's continued mission with a sense of being sent wherever they are.
- Mission is multi-dimensional and liberative. Despite the ambiguous ways in which Christian mission has been carried out in the past, one positive effect for which sensitive people continue to be grateful is the liberation it has brought to people who were socially oppressed and economically backward. The role of Christian mission in peoples' movements in different parts of the world is a pointed reference. But at the same time it must be admitted that the liberative aspect of mission has been forgotten and it has been reduced to "soul winning"; and, more painfully, Christians have contributed to maintaining oppressive systems. Moreover, there are groups, both religious and secular, who are involved in liberative activities. Even the traditional missionary charity works have been taken up by people of other religions. For example, there are Hindu missions running hospitals, schools and refugee homes. Similarly, some secular groups in India are more radical and committed than the churches in

acts of liberation. In such situations the churches, instead of continuing the outdated patterns of mission inherited from the colonial period, should work hand in hand with other groups, joining forces for liberation.

- Evangelism is one aspect of mission. Even if the terms mission and evangelism are misleading today because of undesirable overload of misconceptions they carry, there is a place for witnessing to the gospel. The gospel is not a single formula but a spectrum containing promises and challenges. It is about the reign of God demanding a new orientation in life involving repentance and forgiveness. The reign of God is characterized by justice, peace and love. The central point of reference to its nature is the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus who is made to reign as the crucified Lord until he brings all powers to the feet of God. A response to this point is asked for but the course of action is not dictated. However, we should not lose confidence in the value of the gospel, for it continues to be relevant as long as there are people of all faiths and no faith who need to repent and understand the real nature of love as suffering for others. Moreover, again it should be made clear that sharing the gospel is a duty laid upon every Christian, and people of other faiths need to have sympathy for this fundamental religious duty. It is interesting to note that while a few states in India have passed bills to ban conversion, due to Christian mission, some Hindu thinkers argued that it was the Christians' fundamental duty to propagate their religion and that their preference for freedom of religion and separation of church and state was justified.
- The church is not an office to register souls for a life after death. She is a humble servant participating in God's mission with commitment and openness. The conservative or fundamentalist church is the worst stumbling block for communicating the gospel today. No other form of hypocrisy is more awkward than the one found in a church which is enthusiastic about converting people of other faiths into its fold but without willing to make any changes in its structure, liturgy and pattern of ministry.

From Israel Selvanayagam, "Christian Theology and Mission in the Midst of Many Theologies and Missions", in *Theological Perspectives on Other Faiths*, LWF Documentation 1997/41 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1997), 181-201.

A Response to Christian Theology and Mission in the Midst of Many Theologies and Missions

Péri Rasolondraibe

First of all, I should like to thank Dr I. Selvanayagam for this excellent paper. I can say that we are dealing here with someone who knows his subject well and has taken time and care in putting down on paper his thoughts about theologies and missions. The more one reads, the more one finds depth of meaning.

To be brief, I should like to make my comments in three points and then add a final point to ask for clarification.

(1) It seems to me that the key question to the whole paper is the sentence which reads,

If we continue to uphold the validity of the Christian faith and if we feel the need of sharing it with others while admitting the errors we committed in the past what then should be our response and new approach to people of other faiths?

Responding to this problematic, Dr Selvanayagam suggests an approach which is different from the three traditional theological models, to wit, exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism (of these, pluralism received the most criticism). The new approach for Dr Selvanayagam is “commitment with openness.” This means, commitment to what God has revealed through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as universally valid, and openness to experiences and expressions of God in other religions. In another article,¹ the presenter called this approach “dialogical evangelism and evangelistic dialogue.”

I think that this model responds to our question whether Christians should only listen to and learn from people of other faiths or should also have something to share with others. It is, however, important to note that “witnessing,” according to Dr Selvanayagam, involves the life of the whole Christian community, as a life through which God continues what was begun in Jesus (page). These days, we talk, in a similar way, about “holistic ministry,” when the gospel is not only proclaimed (enunciated or verbalized) but also made real in people’s lives.

(2) In my second comment, I should like to highlight Dr Selvanayagam’s way of linking together faith and mission in the process of dialogue.

In the course of a dialogue, Christians should make their partners understand that Christianity is a kerygmatic religion, meaning that mission is an intrinsic part

¹ “Evangelism and Inter-Faith Dialogue: Are they incompatible or complementary?” in Occasional Paper No. 13, Selly Oak College, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

of the Christian faith. For the Christian, sharing the gospel with others is a joy and a privilege. All missionary religions, the presenter explains, should understand the meaning of religious duty; mission is part of such a duty.

It should be helpful for churches engaged in evangelism if they could develop this way of making themselves understood by people of other faiths, as they themselves try to understand others and their mission endeavors. With genuine openness to others, we need to recognize that we cannot deprive others of the gift of the gospel to be shared as we received it. In this sense, Christian mission in the midst of other missions is possible.

(3) But then, there is the matter of Christian theology and mission. Dr Selvanayagam devoted a large portion of his paper discussing mission theology or biblical theology of mission, dealing specifically with the place of Jesus in God's mission.

If I understand his intent correctly, he would like us to put more emphasis on the gospel rather than on Jesus. For the presenter, Jesus should not be portrayed as an object of worship, a "white tribal god," but as the paradoxical Lamb of the Book of Revelation "having authority yet vulnerable." He writes:

The gospel is not a single formula but a spectrum containing promises and challenges. It is about the reign of God demanding a new orientation in life involving repentance and forgiveness. The reign of God is characterized by justice, peace and love. The central point of reference to its nature is the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus who is made to reign as the crucified Lord until he brings all powers to the feet of God. A response to this point is asked for but the course of action is not dictated.

I can see the value of the emphasis on the gospel and the reign of the crucified Lord for the fostering of an atmosphere conducive to dialogue between and peaceful communal living with people of other faiths. I seriously wonder, however, if Christians can separate the gospel from the person of Jesus Christ without reducing it to the level of concepts and ideologies about God's reign. Is the gospel not anchored in the "news" that God, in Jesus, has shared divine life with what is not God and thus has brought what was created to share in God's eternity?

Moreover, emphasis on the crucified Lord can be very relevant, especially as theological basis for mission endeavors by churches in countries which are culturally prone to dominate others. But I wonder if this can be applied across all religions and situations or should we rather be selective, depending on the situation, as Dr Selvanayagam himself suggests to the pluralists. In Africa, for instance, Jesus as the source and sustainer of life abundant may be the Christ who speaks more clearly to us. One may also wonder about people, Christians who are oppressed and call for liberation. In what way would the emphasis on the crucified Lamb help in the formulation of a theology of liberation?

Finally, a point of clarification, Dr Selvanayagam writes: "Christians should have no problems in appropriating different experiences and expressions of God as long as they testify to God as the supreme being who is loving, just and compassionate." These divine perfections (supreme, loving, just and compassionate), I take it, are to be used as standard measurements for religious affirmations about

God-and that they are the parameters beyond which conversion takes place. My question is: Where are they from? What sets them above all other affirmations about God? Shouldn't these be also submitted to discussion in the course of a dialogue?

Péri Rasolondraibe, "Response", in *Theological Perspectives on Other Faiths*, LWF Documentation 1997/41 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1997), 202-205.

Anti-Judaism – A Problem for New Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Historical Perspective

Wolfgang Kraus

Introduction

In his introduction to Charlotte Klein's *Theologie und Antijudaismus*, Gregory Baum, author of *Die Juden und das Evangelium*¹ writes:

The anti-Jewish feature is more deeply rooted in Christianity than was initially supposed [here Baum also means himself and his earlier book] It is indeed difficult to separate the preaching of the gospel from a negation of the Jewish people. Because, when we proclaim Jesus as the Messiah in whom all the divine promises have been fulfilled, we leave no spiritual room for a religion which does not find it credible to speak about the presence of the Messiah in today's hate-filled, violent world and continues to wait for the messianic age. Therefore it is not easy to proclaim Jesus Christ without this simultaneously including the negation of the Jews. As church, we understand ourselves to be the chosen people which has taken the place of the Jewish people, because that people had cut itself off from the divine covenant by its infidelity. That was already stated in Matthew's Gospel. So can one be surprised that this spiritual negation of Jewish existence developed into a legal and political negation as soon as the church became part of the victorious cultural circles of the classical world?²

In his well-known essay, "Christlicher Antijudaismus. Bemerkungen zu einem semantischen Einschüchterungsversuch" [Christian Anti-Judaism. Comments on a Semantic Attempt at Intimidation] the now retired New Testament scholar from Münster, Günter Klein, writes that by pointing to the sin of all people in Romans 1–3, Israel is equated with the Gentiles and thus "completely deprived of soteriological significance."³ Klein recognizes that the Christian hatred of the Jews in word and deed has indescribably distorted the Christian heritage. Nevertheless, he considers that the anti-Jewish elements in the New Testament cannot be abandoned when they relate to the "worldwide solidarity of the godless" where Jews and Christians are equal, but he would not wish this to be denounced as

¹ Gregory Baum, *Die Juden und das Evangelium. Eine Überprüfung des Neuen Testaments* (Einsiedeln: Benzinger, 1963).

² Gregory Baum, in Charlotte Klein, *Theologie und Anti-Judaismus. Eine Studie zur deutschen theologischen Literatur der Gegenwart* (Munich: Verlag Chr. Kaiser, 1975), 8f.

³ Günter Klein, "Christlicher Antijudaismus. Bemerkungen zu einem Semantischen Einschüchterungsversuch," *ZThK* 79 (1982), 411–450, here 438.

anti-Judaism, “just as the identification of the Gentiles with rebels against God is also not an anti-human act.”⁴

Does this mean that anti-Judaism is a question of definition? I do not want to spend much time on questions of definition, but in this essay to give a description of the phenomenon which can then take the place of a definition.

As far as defining anti-Judaism is concerned, I shall, in line with the definition in the *Reclams Bibellexikon*,⁵ use the term anti-Judaism to mean a religiously based attitude directed against the people of Israel and denying that it is God’s chosen people.

Anti-Judaism in classical times

Hostility to the Jews is not a Christian invention; it was a reality before Christianity came into existence and goes beyond the Christian realm. There are examples to prove this in the Septuagint version of the biblical Book of Esther, in writings of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (*Against Apion* 1,26; 2,91–96), of the Roman writer Juvenal (6th Satire, 542ff.) and of many other classical authors.

In the Book of Esther, Chapter 3, we read:

Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, “There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king’s laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction, Letters were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces, giving orders to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods (Esth 3:8–9; 13).

In the so-called Additions to the Book of Esther, we read,

This is a copy of the letter: “The Great King, Artaxerxes, writes the following to the governors of the hundred twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia and to the officials under them: “Having become ruler of many nations and master of the whole world (not elated with presumption of authority but always acting reasonably and with kindness), I have determined to settle the lives of my subjects in lasting tranquility and, in order to make my kingdom peaceable and open to travel throughout all its extent, to restore the peace desired by all people. “When I asked my counselors how this might be accomplished, Haman—who excels among us in sound judgment, and is distinguished for his unchanging goodwill and steadfast fidelity, and has attained the second place in the kingdom—pointed out to us that among all the nations in the world there is scattered a certain hostile people, who have laws contrary to those of

⁴ Klein, *ibid.*, 414 and 450.

⁵ Klaus Koch, Eckart Otto, Jürgen Roloff and Hans Schmoldt (eds.), *Reclams Bibellexikon* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1987), 37.

every nation and continually disregard the ordinances of kings, so that the unifying of the kingdom that we honorably intend cannot be brought about. We understand that this people, and it alone, stands constantly in opposition to every nation, perversely following a strange manner of life and laws, and is ill-disposed to our government, doing all the harm they can so that our kingdom may not attain stability (Additions to the Book of Esther 3,13 a–e LXX).

The Book of Esther contains the festival legend of the feast of Purim dating from about the third century BCE and describes a conflict in Persia. The Septuagint version is more recent; it probably dates from the second–first century BCE. Its historical reliability is limited but, for the purposes of socio-historical exegesis, it reveals concrete grounds for hostility to the Jews in the second-first century BCE.

In the second century BCE there was a marked Hellenisation of Palestine. Under Antiochus IV this led to the anti-Jewish measures reported in 1 Maccabees 1:44–50. The papyrus London No.1912 provides evidence of the persecution of the group of Jews in Alexandria under the prefect Flaccus in the first century CE. Flavius Josephus, the Jewish historian, writing at the end of the first century CE, reports in *Contra Apionem* II, 91–96 about the Jews being accused of ritual murder. Tacitus, the first-century Roman historian refers in his comments on the history of Israel to an account by an Egyptian priest, Manetho. In Tacitus we read that:

While the East was under the sway of the Assyrians, the Medes, and the Persians, Jews were the most contemptible of the subject tribes. When the Macedonians became supreme, King Antiochus strove to destroy the national superstition, and to introduce Greek civilization, but was prevented by his war with the Parthians from at all improving this vilest of nations [the Jewish people].⁶

The classical pagan evidence shows that anti-Judaism in classical times had religious and social motives. It was mainly the product of the special character of the Jews; they believed in only one God and not in many gods, which was called “superstition;” they kept the Sabbath and rejected Greek customs; they maintained circumcision and refrained from particular foods, etc. It is also characteristic of classical, pagan anti-Judaism that it was not a dominant element. It was not a permanent reality and only occurred sporadically.

Christian hostility to Jews and Judaism is primarily motivated by religion and in contrast to classical, pagan anti-Judaism and, on the whole, constitutes a continuum ever since the second century CE. Christians defined their own identity in contradistinction to Judaism. At the same time, they attempted to demonstrate their superiority over Judaism. The evidence of pagan anti-Judaism was welcome as providing a further argument in favor of one’s estimation of oneself. Looking back on two-thousand years of church history, one has no option but to recognize that, in addition to concrete campaigns for the oppression and persecution of Jews, which led to mass murder and terror long before the *Shoah* (crusades,

⁶ <http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/histories.5.v.html>

Spain), the contribution Christianity has made to anti-Judaism consists mainly of having created an anti-Jewish climate. For centuries, Christian theology gave anti-Judaism religious depth, cultural anchorage and sociological breadth. In the process, it produced a naïve rejection of everything Jewish and made it part of the general Christian heritage, coming to light in “thoughtlessness” such as the use of the term “Pharisee” for a mixture of coffee and spirits. Thus, Christianity laid the foundations on which the militant antisemitism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was able to build and perform its frightful deeds. In the process, social-Darwinist racial theories were combined with pseudo-religious, ideological, psycho-social and political motives.⁷

The question is how such a perversion could come about. How could a religion, which considers the command of love for God and one’s neighbor to be central, contribute to fanning hatred and persecution of Jews in the name of Jesus? How could the cross, as the sign of reconciliation, become a sign of bitter persecution? Where are the roots to be found?

The origins of Christian anti-Judaism

The beginnings

The roots of Christian anti-Judaism go back to the beginnings of the Christian faith. Christianity originated in the context of classical Judaism. Jesus was born as a Jew and lived as a Jew. The disciples of Jesus were Jewish people. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, was a Jew and frequently underlined the fact (Rom 11:1; 2 Cor 11:22f.; Gal 1:13f.; Phil. 3:5f.). The Early Church saw itself as a group within God’s people Israel—certainly not as a new religion. It was only when non-Jews joined the early Christian community that the situation changed.⁸

Questions such as what their standing should be in the congregation, whether they had to convert to Judaism before they could belong to the congregation, whether they needed to keep the basic Jewish rules (especially food regulations, the Sabbath and festivals), whether they could be considered equal to the Jewish members of the congregation, gave rise to lively debate (cf. Gal 2:1–10; 11–15; Acts 15:1–29; Rom 14). As a separate group, recognizably different from the Gentiles and the Jews, early Christianity was found for the first time in Antioch where the followers of Jesus of Nazareth were given the name “Christians” (cf. Acts 11:26). But the life of the communities of people who confessed Jesus as the Messiah continued for several decades within the Jewish realm. The existence and impor-

⁷ Cf. on this question Klaus Haacker, “Der Holocaust als Datum der Theologiegeschichte,” in E. Brocke and J. Seim (eds.), *Gottes Augapfel. Beiträge zur Erneuerung des Verhältnisses von Christen und Juden* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986), 137–145.

⁸ Cf. in this connection Wolfgang Kraus, “Zwischen Jerusalem und Antiochia. Die ‘Hellenisten,’ Paulus und die Aufnahme der Heiden in das endzeitliche Gottesvolk,” *Stuttgarter Bibelstudien* 179 (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1999).

tance of congregations which were predominantly, or at least partly, composed of people who came out of Judaism—namely the so-called Jewish Christians—have been recognized increasingly in recent research, together with its relevance for the history of early Christianity. Thus, the date for the final parting of ways lies closer to the end rather than the middle of the first century—but it also depends on the area in which the congregations were to be found.

The early Christian congregations demonstrate different degrees of closeness to or distance from the Jewish congregations of the time. This is reflected in the New Testament writings. Practically all the New Testament writers agree that the Christian congregations have their roots in Judaism. The Christians' understanding of themselves is inconceivable without the Jewish background. But, the extent to which this Jewish background is of lasting importance also for "Gentile Christian" congregations and to what extent the people of Israel itself continue to be "God's people," is understood in different ways in the New Testament.

In general, the history of early Christianity in the first century can be understood as the story of its detachment from Judaism and its definition of itself over against Judaism and the Gentiles.

Anti-Judaism as a phenomenon of detachment (identity by delimitation)

When a new religious community comes into existence and detaches itself slowly from its mother religion, this is normally accompanied by polemics, accusations, insinuations and limitations. This can be demonstrated in the relation between the Qumran community and the rest of Judaism (the opponents are called "sons of Beliar," children of the devil) and it also applies to the detachment of Christianity from Judaism. Yet, Jesus himself had no intention of founding a new religious community. By means of his message about the coming sovereignty of God, he wanted to gather Israel as the eschatological people of the twelve tribes. His message therefore was also a call to his contemporaries to turn back to God. While Jesus' call for conversion did not exclude criticism of the circumstances or persons of his time, it was based on a solidarity with Israel which is beyond question. Nowhere did Jesus fundamentally question the election of Israel.

This changed at the moment when the ways of Christians and Jews finally parted. Later, a number of polemical features of Jesus' message were made sharper or presented as fundamental. Similarly, Jesus' partners in debate were presented as ill-intentioned opponents, and the disputations which were normal among rabbis were exaggerated and seen as hostile disputes between Jesus and "the Jews." There is evidence of this in individual texts of the New Testament. It means that certain anti-Jewish statements in the New Testament should be understood as reflecting the phenomenon of detachment.

One example of this is Jesus' conversation with a Scribe in Mark 12:28–34 and its inclusion and expansion in Matthew 22:34–40. What we see in Mark is an amicable conversation between two Jewish rabbis on the Holy Scriptures and a core principle of the Jewish faith. Matthew, who wrote his Gospel about twenty

years later than Mark, turned it into a hostile dispute between the Pharisees and Jesus. Jesus was to be condemned for false teaching by means of an intrigue.

“Anti-Jewish” statements as indices of contemporary disagreements (socio-historical exegesis)

One result of New Testament biblical research, socio-historical exegesis, shows that the gospels must be read at two different levels: as the presentation of Jesus’ story and, at the same time, as an expression of the circumstances in which the congregations were living. Since the evangelists did not simply tell the story of Jesus in documentary fashion, but also included experiences of their own time, many of the texts reflect more the period when the gospel was written than the time of the earthly Jesus. Various statements containing polemics against Jews thus do not genuinely come from Jesus, but constitute a new interpretation of the Jesus tradition at a later time under different conditions. Backward projections of this kind give the impression that Jesus himself was engaged in an irreconcilable conflict with his partners in dialogue.

Further evidence of this process can be found by comparing the gospels, e.g. the parable of the great dinner (Lk 14:16–24) with the parable of the royal wedding banquet (Mt 22:1–14). One of Jesus’ parables which is the background to both is not just recorded here in documentary form but interpreted further. Matthew 22:7, in particular, makes clear that the evangelist has incorporated into his account the events of the year 70 CE, the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem during the Jewish war against Rome, and assessed them negatively as a direct punishment from God on Judaism. This reflects the dispute between Matthew’s congregation and the congregation at the synagogue. The Pharisees were the only religious group left after the Jewish war. Their opposition to the Christian congregation is projected by Matthew as enmity back into the time of Jesus. Even though the Pharisees had probably belonged to the group which was closest to Jesus, in Matthew’s time they represented the majority of the Jews who rejected the message of the cross and resurrection. The hostile image of them which developed as a result of Matthew’s presentation still has its effect today. “Pharisee” has become a derogatory term.

Should Matthew therefore be described as an anti-Judaist? Here I would be cautious. I still see evidence in his views of—at least in his mind—an internal Jewish dispute! As far as the sharpness of the wording is concerned, it can be compared with the polemics used by the supporters of the Essenes against the Jerusalem party.

In addition, Matthew is a Jewish Christian! Behind his attack on the Jews is his disappointment about their rejection of Jesus. He is not someone watching the events objectively from outside.

Jesus came to the people, as Matthew emphasizes in Matthew 1:21, in order to save them, but the people rejected him. Herod and the whole of Jerusalem with him were shocked at the announcement of the birth—an historically bizarre scene which reflects the dispute between Matthew’s congregation and its Jewish setting.

The person speaking is not uninvolved and keeping a safe distance, but rather a Jew speaking to Jews; a disappointed man whose love has become harsh and unjust.

And, finally, Matthew uses the same sharp wording in relation to Jews as we find in relation to those in his own congregation who do not do the will of the Heavenly Father (cf. Mt. 7:15–20; 21–27; 22:1–14; 25:1–13; 14–30).

A decisive expression used time and again in Matthew's Gospel is "bearing fruit," doing the deeds which God demands. The Sermon on the Mount ends with the parable of the house built on sand or rock. The distinction runs right through Matthew's congregation. The broad and the narrow path do not refer to believers or unbelievers, but to the congregation itself. The person who lacked a wedding garment and was cast out to where there was wailing and gnashing of teeth was not an unbeliever, but a member of the congregation who only said "Lord, Lord," but did not do what God demanded. Both the wise and foolish virgins in Matthew 25 stand for people in his congregation. So, even when speaking about his congregation, Matthew does not mince his words.

"Anti-Jewish" statements as a reaction to the events of the year 70 CE

The biblical passages to which we have already referred (Lk 14:16–24 or Mt 22:1–14) refer to a significant problem regarding the relations between the developing church and the Judaism of that time, as well as Judaism itself: the destruction of the temple which deprived Judaism of what, up to then, had been its religious center. As a consequence, what was needed was a new definition of Judaism without a temple. This phase coincided with the final detachment of the Christian community from Judaism. It involved a dual movement—rejection and self-delimitation. Both Jews and Christians understood themselves as the legitimate heirs of the biblical Israel, the people which God had chosen. One exegete has summarized it as follows: "The tablecloth has been severed, the struggle over the inheritance has broken out."⁹ In the process, the polemics came from both sides.

A new definition of Judaism has a reverse side. It also means narrowing down the range of what can be accepted as Jewish. This leads to the rejection of those who are felt to be heretics and no longer acceptable. Among those rejected were, for example, Hellenistic Judaism, as can be seen in the writings of the Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, comprising those "Christians" who were of Jewish descent and who considered themselves as still belonging to Judaism.

The introduction of the *birkat ha-minim*, the so-called "blessing of heretics," into the *Shemone Esre* (18 petition prayer, 12th section) also took place in this context. The wording is directed generally against Jewish heretics and not primarily against "Nazarenes." But it also made it impossible for Jews who believed in Jesus to continue to attend worship in the synagogue. Exclusion from the synagogue

⁹ Hubert Frankemölle, "Jahwebund und Kirche Christi: Studien zur Form- und Traditionsgeschichte des Evangeliums nach Matthäus," *NTA NF 10*, Münster (1974).

community towards the end of the first century is probably also what is behind some statements in the Gospel of John (Jn 9:22; 12:42; 16:2).

“Anti-Jewish” statements to cope with the traumatic experience of division

The Gospel of John goes a bit further in its anti-Jewish polemics than Matthew. At many points in John we find “the Jews” as a united hostile front. Because of John’s characteristic way of thinking in absolute opposites (dualism), “the Jews” are placed completely on the negative side because they reject Jesus as the Messiah. They are Jesus’ opponents, enemies of the church and representatives of the “world” that is hostile to God. In the violent disputes Jesus conducts with “the Jews” in John’s Gospel, the Jews claim to be children of Abraham. The Johannine Jesus responds to this with extreme ferocity: “the Jews” could not be children of Abraham because they were trying to kill Jesus. They could not bear the truth which he embodied and therefore their father was not Abraham and also not God but, on the contrary, the devil (Jn 8:31–47).

You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him (Jn 8:44).

The historical Jesus never really spoke like this. On the contrary, these words reflect the dispute between the Johannine congregation—which was certainly a minority—and its Jewish surroundings. Even though one can understand what led to the ferocity of the dispute, the sentence used by John had disastrous consequences. The situation of the Johannine congregation seems to have been very tense.

Only in John we read that those who confessed Jesus as the Messiah were excluded from the synagogue (*aposynagogos einai*). The background to this must have been a concrete experience at the end of the first century.

The polemic statements against Jews in John are closely connected with Johannine christology. Jesus alone reveals the Father. Because of John’s typical dualism, there can be only yes or no, supporters or opponents, believers or godless. Thus, the Jews who do not believe are on the side of God’s enemies.

Must we therefore describe John as an anti-Judaist? Here, too, I would be cautious. I hesitate for the following reasons: (1) There are also some positive statements, in John, i.e., John 4:22. It is true that negation predominates in John but it is not absolute. (2) John sees himself as an “Israelite” and uses this description as a title of honor: John 1:47 (Nathanael). (3) The sharp polemics used against the Jews are also used—as in Matthew—against other unbelievers.

Different emphases in the New Testament as an indication of an unfinished problem

If one compares the four gospels and their attitudes to the Jews and Judaism, it is striking that the gospels which evidence the greatest closeness to Judaism (Matthew and John) contain the fiercest polemics against representatives of Judaism. The story of Jesus' passion increasingly became a special point of concentration for anti-Jewish statements in the New Testament. The passion stories in the gospels are not legal records, but presentations that pursue clearly theological aims, and therefore sometime merge history and theology to the disadvantage of history. One will also note that the burden is laid more and more on the Jewish side and taken away from Pilate.

The details of the New Testament writings indicate various attitudes to Judaism. In addition to explicit polemics, there are also writings marked by a real "forgetfulness of Israel," such as 1 Peter where Judaism seems virtually no longer to play a part even as an historical background. In almost all the New Testament writings, expressions which had traditionally been applied to Israel have been transferred to the Christian church: people of God (Heb 4:9–11), God's own people (1 Pet 2:9), priests for God (Rev 1:6), etc. This can imply a link, but also an expropriation. The variety in the New Testament is wide and it is impossible to identify a uniform position. In this connection the 1991 study of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) *Christen und Juden II*, rightly observes that, behind the variety of attitudes to Israel and Judaism in the New Testament, "there lies a...problem which has not finally been resolved."¹⁰

Paul: continuity and change

The New Testament also contains the case of an author who later corrected his earlier statements: Paul. In the first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul suddenly bursts out into fierce polemics against "the Jews." (1 Thess 2:14–16) Behind this lies his concern about his congregation in Thessalonica which is facing persecution like that which he himself and others had imposed on the congregations.

The harshest expression, in my opinion, is when Paul uses a well-known motif of the time—the eschatological measure according to which God never allows his people's sin to reach the highest limit but chastises it first (the Lord disciplines those whom he loves)—and reverses it by saying that the full measure of anger has come upon them. In Paul's Letter to the Galatians there are also some extremely polemical sentences, especially in the allegory of Sarah and Hagar (Gal 4:21–31). According to what he says there, one could conclude that Paul supported the

¹⁰ Cf. EKD-Studie, "Christen und Juden II," Kirchenamt der EKD (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1991), 53. In Judea in the past. He uses the stereotypes found in pagan anti-Judaism: the Jews are the enemies of all people, etc.

theory of substitution according to which the church had replaced Israel as the people of God so that there was no positive prospect for Israel any more.

Fortunately, the verses in 1 Thessalonians and what he said in Galatians were not Paul's last word on the Jewish people. On the contrary, in his Letter to the Romans, especially chapters 9–11, Paul spelled out his attitude to Israel in great detail and also corrected his earlier polemics.¹¹

Hermeneutical considerations

Historical reminder

One should not forget that, unlike in later times, for the first phase of the history of Christianity, it is significant who is speaking. The polemical statements against Jews in the New Testament were made by people who were Jews themselves. The situation would be different if a Gentile Christian coming from outside were to voice criticism.

Moreover, the Christian congregations in the first century were minorities in every respect. It makes a difference whether a—sometimes oppressed—minority says something polemical, or whether a representative of the majority does so, and then follows up the polemical words with deeds. When Christianity had become a state religion and then thought it could simply quote the polemics of the New Testament in order to describe the Jews, that was more than a serious misjudgment; it was a theological *faux pas* of the highest degree.

The wording of the Bible and the history of its effects

Today—in view of the persecution of the Jews—we face a dilemma when we look at the “anti-Jewish” statements of the New Testament. We are aware of the disastrous effects of individual statements on the course of history, but we cannot simply delete these texts from the New Testament. Our task is to deal with them critically, as part of the inheritance we have received.

This implies, first, that we must see their temporal limitations, and not understand them as absolute dogmas containing eternal truths. It means, secondly, that we should see them as expressions of disappointed love filled with profound emotion, and not as statements on the essence of Jews and Judaism. Thirdly, we must recognize the interests which people on the church's side had in defining themselves as the true heirs of the Old Testament. Fourthly, as a consequence, we must learn to distinguish which statements in the New Testament can claim greater theological importance, and which little or are essentially problematic.

¹¹ For greater detail, cf. Wolfgang Kraus, *Das Volk Gottes. Zur Grundlegung der Ekklesiologie bei Paulus*, WUNT 85 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr Paul Siebeck, 1996), esp. paras. 9 and 12.

Is anti-Judaism essential to Christianity— the left hand of Christology?

In a debate with David Flusser in the 1970s, Ulrich Wilckens spoke in favor of considering anti-Judaism inherent in Christianity, indeed as *theologically necessary*.¹² The New Testament scholar, Günter Klein, followed the same line.¹³ Similarly, but with a quite different aim, Rosemary Ruether wrote, “We have recognized that the anti-Jewish myth was neither a superficial nor a secondary element of Christian thinking. The foundations for anti-Judaism had been laid in the New Testament.”¹⁴ Looking at Paul’s position, I consider this evaluation inappropriate, indeed theologically wrong. Naturally, one must admit that, in Matthew or John for example, the view of Judaism should be seen as depending on a particular christological approach. But Paul himself shows in Romans that christological argumentation must not necessarily sound anti-Jewish—although I agree that this has certainly been seen differently by the traditional interpretation of Romans. Rosemary Ruether asks, “Is it possible to say ‘Jesus is the Messiah’ without simultaneously saying implicitly ‘and the Jews must be damned?’”¹⁵ And my answer is, yes, it is possible; Paul demonstrated it in the Letter to the Romans.

Demands on Christian theology based on the biblical evidence

A theological decision is required: the continuing election of the Jewish people and not the substitution of the first chosen people of God by the church

In the New Testament, various conceptions of God’s people Israel and of its position in the history of salvation exist side by side in an unbalanced way. It is not easily possible to reduce them to a common denominator. On the contrary, they reflect an unfinished problematical issue which was not resolved uniformly even in the New Testament period.¹⁶ Although the question who really were the people of God played a decisive part in early Christianity, the answers given varied.¹⁷ This was related to the history of the development of the New Testament writings referred to above. Paul was the only New Testament author who dealt

¹² David Flusser, “Ulrich Wilckens und die Juden,” *EvTh* 34 (1974), pp. 236–243; Ulrich Wilckens, “Das Neue Testament und die Juden. Antwort an David Flusser,” *EvTh* 34 (1974), 602–611.

¹³ Klein, *op. cit.* (note 3), 411–450.

¹⁴ Rosemary Ruether, “Nächstenliebe und Brudermord. Die theologischen Wurzeln des Antijudaismus,” *ACJD* 7 (Munich: Kaiser 1978, engl. ed. Faith and Fratricide), 210.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 229.

¹⁶ Cf. EKD-Studie, *op. cit.* (note 8), 53.

¹⁷ Cf. Wolfgang Kraus, “Paulinische Perspektiven zum Thema ‘bleibende Erwählung Israels,’” in Wolfgang Kraus (ed.), *Christen und Juden. Perspektiven einer Annäherung* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1997), 143–170, here 144 ff.

specifically and explicitly with the question of the relation between the previous people of God, Israel, and the eschatological people of God.

According to Paul, the Gentiles called by Christ have an equal right to belong to the eschatological people of God because of baptism: they are children of God, descendants of Abraham and thus heirs of the promise (Gal 3:26–29; Rom 8:14–17). But for Paul this does not exclude Israel from remaining the people chosen by God rather than being replaced by the Christian church (Rom 9:1–5; 11:1f.; 28f.; 15:7–13). Thus Paul is the only writer in the New Testament who has explicitly done justice to the problem of the people of God in its double form, to the question of the “church” and of “Israel.”

In order to get to the solution we find in the Letter to the Romans, Paul too followed highways and byways which are reflected in different arguments in his letters. Even Paul could only find a solution after several attempts.

For Paul the decisive theological problem in the Letter to the Romans consisted in the question: How can the conception of a lasting promise of God to Israel continue to exist alongside the message of the redemption of all people through Christ alone in view of Israel’s persistent rejection of Jesus as the Messiah? The doctrine of election against Christology.

We should not underestimate the sensitivity of this problem. The other New Testament authors also recognized the problem. As a rule they assumed that Israel as the people of God had been substituted by the church. That was not Paul’s view in the Letter to the Romans.

The special feature of Paul’s approach is that it is God’s righteousness which was revealed by the Christ event (Rom 3:21) and caused the question of the lasting validity of God’s promises to Israel (Rom 9:1ff.; 11:1) to arise. God’s righteousness, in the sense of his faithfulness to the covenant, does not let go of Israel even though Jesus is not recognized as the Messiah by the majority of Israel. In his faithfulness to the covenant, God will lead Israel to the final salvation by means of the “deliverer of Zion” (Rom 11:26f.). In this way the doctrine of justification itself, which is often interpreted as being irreconcilable with the continuing election of Israel, becomes the possibility for maintaining the *solus Christus* at the same time as the validity of the divine promises to Israel.

The conclusion which Paul reaches in the Letter to the Romans thus differs from those in the First Letter to the Thessalonians or in the Letter to the Galatians. Whether one can therefore speak about a development in Pauline theology is controversial. But the point at issue is not the term “development.” It is much more important to recognize that compared to the statements in 1 Thessalonians and Galatians what is said in the Letter to the Romans constitutes a conscious correction or withdrawal of arguments.

So the solution of the problem which Paul sets out in Romans is: God’s *promissio* to the first chosen people is still valid. Israel is chosen by virtue of the divine promise. This election cannot be readily seen in outward things, but it still really applies because God’s promise has the strength to establish reality.

And vice versa: through Christ the church has been chosen to belong to the people of God. This, however, also applies in the mode of a promise, namely from God’s side, in the form of *promissio*, and is outwardly not visible. It is valid in the same sense that a promise is a reality.

An expression we find in Paul and which has not yet been given the attention it deserves in the exegetical discussion is that in Romans 15:7–13. It states: the promises, God's *επαγγελιαι* [epaggelíai] stand firm, they have been confirmed by Christ, because he came as the servant of the circumcised to confirm the promises to the fathers—not to fulfil them! (cf. Rom. 15:8).

Lutherans should be particularly attentive at this point, because the term *επαγγελιαι* used here, *promissio* in Latin, is a central concept in Luther's theology. One can spell out Luther's theology starting from *promissio*.

In my view that approach offers a basis for an appropriate definition of the relationship between the church and Israel, Christians and Jews, which can also contribute to overcoming the anti-Judaism in Christian theology. This would open up the possibility for Christian theology to keep its distance from the theory of substitution, the claim to exclusivity, which is used theologically to dispute Israel's right to exist. Looking at it from the point of view of *promissio*, Christian theology can trust that God has established a lasting relationship with Israel and that in Christ the church simultaneously belongs to God's chosen people.

I believe it would really be desirable—also in systematic, theological reasoning—to spell out the relation between the church and Israel starting from the doctrine of justification understood as promise.

An important—perhaps the most important—theological, critical and hermeneutical problem concerning the doctrine of justification, as it is presented in the Letter to the Romans, is to demonstrate that the Pauline approach found there is an appropriate expression of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and must therefore point the way for our reflection. What is at stake is nothing less than objective theological criticism in the Bible itself.

To put it clearly: by demonstrating that in Romans 11:25–27 Paul is speaking of the saving of “all Israel”—irrespective of whether by a “special way” (a *Sonderweg*) or the “normal way”—only half of the problem has been solved. That all Israel will be saved: Does this perhaps mean the last, possibly psychologically motivated but nevertheless fruitless, attempt in a context rich in divergent approaches (Rom 9–11), somehow still has to deal with the problem of Jesus' being rejected by the majority of Israel?¹⁸ Is this then a solution with a sledgehammer? Or, does the conclusion of Romans 11 fit into the overall argumentation of Romans 9–11 and this in turn into the overall approach of Romans 1ff.? And to continue: Does Romans 9–11 only constitute the discussion of a question which arises in Paul's biography, or is it the peak of what must be said according to the apostle's doctrine of justification? Then these statements would have brought us to the heart of his theology. But, how do Paul's other statements about Israel fit in? And how should we define the relation to other New Testament views where there is no reference to all Israel being saved? And, finally, the Christian Bible comprises the writings of the Old and New Testaments. How should the Pauline statements and the (sometimes contradictory) statements of other New Testament authors be seen in the context of the Bible as a whole?

¹⁸ Cf. in this connection the papers mentioned in Kraus, *op. cit.* (note 17), 158, note 41 and 159, note 45.

If the objective theological necessity of the statements in Romans 11:25–27 (and also 11:28ff.; 15:7–13) cannot be demonstrated in the context of the Pauline theology of justification, then there are no conclusive reasons against marginalizing them in a psychological or some other way.

It is then not difficult to unhinge the popularity of this text and the insistence on its statements—which is often found among those involved in Christian-Jewish dialogue. I am convinced that exegetically speaking the heart of the debate is whether Romans 11:25–27 should be seen in the context of the Pauline, New Testament and, generally, biblical statements as an appropriate expression of the gospel of Jesus Christ, with all the consequences this has for the church and theology. A theological decision is required here which, in my view, can only be: Paul in Romans indicates the criterion for our relation to Judaism; God has not rejected the people which he had previously chosen for his own (Rom 11:2). The source of this statement is at the heart of the Pauline doctrine of justification; it is a genuine expression of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A new ecclesiology is required: Israel as an integral part of how Christians understand themselves

Despite their goodwill, the churches find it hard to develop a totally new relationship to Judaism. One of the reasons for this is that Judaism is a permanent challenge to how the church understands itself. I thus see one reason for the defensiveness still found in many quarters regarding a fundamental renewal in the “justified” fear that it may affect us, indeed, that afterwards we might no longer be what we were before.

I can confirm that from my own experience. There are reasons to “fear” that dealing with questions of the Christian-Jewish relationship may not leave those involved unaffected and may in fact change them. It is one thing to recognize that Christianity has Jewish roots. Even this recognition has not come easily to some, but today only an ignoramus would deny it. But it does fundamentally question the Christian identity if it is recognized and admitted that Judaism must constitute an integral component when formulating the church’s understanding of itself.

When the church recognizes that God has established a lasting relationship between Israel and Godself, the church must first formulate its own understanding of itself in such a way that Israel’s understanding of itself is not demoted.¹⁹ In addition, the church must admit that it does not stand alone as “God’s people,” and for precisely this reason, Israel must necessarily be included in the description of the Christian identity. The Jewish roots of Christianity can degenerate into a merely historical memory. A real partnership with Israel as the chosen people makes a Christian self-definition which does not include Israel appear inadequate. Here we still have much to learn from Paul (*cf. esp. Rom 15:7–13*). In other

¹⁹ *Cf. EKD-Studie, op. cit. (note 10), 54.*

words, an adequate Christian ecclesiology can exist only if it also includes the first chosen people of God.

Anyone who has followed the discussion which arose in reaction to the statement of the “Konferenz landeskirchlicher Arbeitskreise Christen und Juden” [Conference of regional churches’ working groups on Christians and Jews] on the new orders of worship will understand what problems of Christian self-understanding are involved here.²⁰ The same applies to the statement on “50-Jahre Berlin-Weißensee,” of November 2000.

What is needed is a transformation of the Christian claim to absoluteness into eschatological terminology

Christian theology needs to recognize that it is not sufficient to declaim that salvation has come in Christ. It needs to spell out what that means and in the process it must not try glibly to ignore contemporary experiences of suffering and of the absence of salvation. It must translate its statements about the salvation which has come in Christ into eschatological terms in a way which continues to make the *promissio* character of these statements clear so that they cannot be confused with ontological affirmations.²¹ We have been saved—but in hope! (Rom 8:24). Or, as it is expressed in 1 John 3:2: what we will be has not yet been revealed. Outwardly salvation is not yet visible. The assurance of redemption is true in the *promissio* mode.

What was said in Romans 9–11 about the Jews (that election still applies and they will be saved at the end of time) is applied in 1 Corinthians 15:25 to Christ himself: he has been set in his ruling position but he has not yet made his rule prevail. So all the statements about the presence of salvation have the character of prolepsis and anticipation. In this way it is possible to maintain the dignity and integrity of the Jewish way. This does not mean reducing the salvation which has come in Christ but making it more precise. What is the reality about salvation? Here I would speak like Luther about a “reality in the word,” the reality of the promise.

In the biblical message, it is finally a matter of the visible establishment of God’s sovereignty, the prevalence and recognition of the divine name. And here the Jewish and Christian traditions are very similar: Zechariah 14:9 ... “on that day the Lord will be one and his name one,” the final verse of synagogue worship, and 1 Corinthians 15:28, “...God may be all in all,” have the same aim in mind. In this eschatological hope Christians and Jews are not far removed from one another.

²⁰ Cf. in this connection, Arnulf Baumann and Ulrich Schwemer (eds.), *Lobe mit Abrahams Samen. Israel im evangelischen Gottesdienst – Eine Arbeitshilfe* (Heppenheim/Wolfsburg, 1995); Texte aus der VELKD No. 68/1996: *Die Anliegen des christlich-jüdischen Dialogs und der christliche Gottesdienst* (Hanover, 1996). For further comments in the context of this debate cf. Hans Hermann Henrix and Wolfgang Kraus, *Die Kirchen und das Judentum II. Dokumente von 1986–2000* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2001), documents E.III.33’, 42’, 43’, 44’, 51’, 55’, 61’.

²¹ Cf. Gregory Baum, Introduction to Faith and Fratricide, *op. cit.* (note 14), 24.

Loving your neighbor

From Wolfgang Kraus, "Anti-Judaism – A Problem for New Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Historical Perspective" in *A Shift in Jewish-Lutheran Relations?* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2003), 69-88.

Spirits: The Biblical View

Monica J. Melanchthon

Introduction

The subject of this paper is one that I have not explored before and with which I am therefore not very familiar. Having grown up in an urban setting, ghosts and spirits were beings I only heard of from childhood peers seeking to scare me. Yet, in recent years, while working in Chennai, a city with a significant Christian population, I have come across many students and Christians from mainline churches, who believe in spirits and approach Christian diviners and faith healers in moments of distress. Many of my students have shared with me first-hand experiences of encounters with spirits, most often bad ones. On one occasion a student had exhibited unusual behavior during her period of study at the seminary. Many students, including herself, believed that it was a case of possession. Administrative efforts to have her cured with the help of modern medicine and psychotherapy failed. Eventually, a group of concerned students gathered every midnight over several weeks and prayed, some in “tongues” and others in their own languages. As part of the efforts to help, men and women, mainly from the Pentecostal tradition, were also brought in to pray. One of them declared that the spirits (bad ones obviously) lingered outside the hostel to repossess the individual if she were to become weak. It was eventually acknowledged that it was the sustained efforts of the students and their prayers that healed the student concerned. Although many would not publicly acknowledge the experience as one of possession, they would in confidence maintain that it was so.

More recently, during discussions following a seminar on theological education in which the need for a shift in emphasis, and the need to train students with skills to respond to social concerns and issues was stressed, one member was overheard as saying that the majority of Christians living in rural areas were having to deal with spirit/demon possession. He maintained that the church was growing on account of the efforts of those working in the rural areas to cast out demons and hence theological institutions should train students in the art of exorcism.

The origin of the belief in spirits and demons can be traced to the so-called tribal religions and thought forms, which endorsed the belief that even such inanimate objects as trees and stones have their own spirit which they venerate. Every tree or stone, every snake or wild beast, may contain some spirit or other, and ancestors return to live again in whom they choose. Support for this view is found in many communities. The spirits are sometimes localized but in other cases they have a wide provenance. Trees and stones are therefore inhabited by the spirits. Various natural phenomena are also often attributed to spirits of one type or another. Thus, it is believed for example that smallpox was the manifestation of the power of a spirit.

Natural disasters are believed to be caused by angry spirits that needed to be placated. This belief has resulted in the development of protective taboos by which individuals protect their lands, crops, or homes. Even more important is the strong belief in ancestral spirits and their influence on the individual, family, clan and tribe as a whole. Sacrifices are therefore offered to the ancestors as well as various other spirits.

At the same time, one cannot but be impressed by the fact that among many, there is always some reference to God as the center of the supreme authority which controls the world. God is of course ubiquitous and can be invoked to take an active interest in human affairs. That is to say, God is thought of as a vindicator, the relative who is prepared to expose himself/ herself to any risk in order to protect a weaker member of the family.¹ It is therefore generally assumed that God created and rules the world. God is a God of justice. Because God is also believed to be situated remote from everyday events of human life, the spirits are approached to intervene and intercede on behalf of the community or individual. The spirits are regarded as being more responsible for day-to-day life. The average individual is bewildered by the physical factors of life; sickness and death are factors of great significance.

I do not seek to refute any of these stances or undermine the experiences of individuals. I do not intend to prove or disprove the existing belief in spirits. I would, however, like to highlight the fact that such a belief system is existent within the membership of our churches. Existing practices of the church (mainline) do not allow for the expression of such beliefs nor are attempts being made to find ways to help those struggling to understand this in the light of the increasing influence of Pentecostal and Charismatic groups which endorse such a belief. This essay seeks to understand the phenomenon of spirits as it is expressed and understood within the biblical and deuterocanonical traditions.

Who/What are spirits?

Spirits are beings of the invisible environment active for good or ill in human affairs. Gods may be spirits and spirits may grow into gods, but usually their powers rank them below the gods and above humankind. The idea of a human soul separate from the body was the model for the conception of a nonhuman spirit. This idea was probably the most fruitful of all the adventures in humankind's interpretation of the world. It split the universe into two, making possible the dualism of spirit-matter, soul-body, this-world and other-world.² It transformed the real gods of nature of the early religions into special beings and released them for limitless growth in the unseen realm. It made possible all the various forms of belief in afterlife existence and in ages of frustration and furnished a safe haven for values unattainable on earth.³

¹ Harry Sawyerr, *God: Ancestor or Creator? Aspects of Traditional Belief in Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone* (London: Longman, 1970), 3.

² A. Eustace Haydon, "Spirits," in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945), 731.

³ *Ibid.*

The belief in spirits is not only characteristic of the religions of preliterate peoples, but also of those of early civilizations namely, Egypt, Babylon, Iran, Greece, Rome, India, China, Japan and also in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity. A host of spirits are said to work with and against humankind. Their activity was seen in all startling or unusual happenings. The good spirits could fulfill human desire, bring luck, fertility and protect from dangers. Sometimes a spirit could be persuaded to take up its abode in a material object and be a constant companion as the beneficent power of a fetish. Evil spirits were blamed for the dangerous and devastating moods of nature, for sickness, pestilence, death, possession and nightmares making it difficult to distinguish between ghosts and spirits. Ancestral souls care for the welfare of their families like good spirits.

Higher religions acknowledge spirits, which are usually specialized and named according to their activity or weal and woe. Sometimes a name applied to a class of spirits merges the vague multitude into one who becomes a god or a powerful devil. Since spirits are not human, they take on any form imaginable. Spirits are usually classified according to their dwelling place, sky, air, earth, underworld, water, forests or mountains. Good spirits are treated as lesser gods. Demons are to be held in check by powerful charms.

The biblical perspective

The Hebrew Bible uses the term *ruach*, which is derived from a verb meaning “to breathe” or “to blow,” nearly four hundred times. The noun may be translated as “breath,” “wind” or “spirit.” The Greek word *pneuma* is used just as frequently and may mean “breath,” “wind,” but most frequently “spirit” associated with God, the human being or the other spiritual beings.

Both the Hebrew and the Greek term cover a wide range of meanings and speak of an “incorporeal, sentient, intelligent being, or the element by virtue of which a being is sentient, intelligent, etc.”⁴ Spirit involves life, but is not necessarily associated with material form, and thus the Bible often describes as “spirit” some incorporeal being which has direction, purpose and power.

The Hebrew Bible

In the Hebrew Bible, the term *ruach* is used to describe the invisible and transcendent nature of God. God is by nature spirit, while human beings only have spirit. God is also the source of all other spirits (Gen 2:7; 6:3; Ps 104:29; Job 34:14–15). Sometimes the expression “spirit of God” is itself used to refer to God or to express some of the divine attributes. It is used to refer to the vital principle in God’s creatures (Ps 104:29–30). It is in this sense with regard to human beings

⁴ F. Foulkes, “Spirit,” in *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 504.

it has the meaning of “soul/spirit” (Ps 76:12).⁵ Sometimes it appears as something additional to soul, a source of strength (1 Sam 30:12).

Apart from expressing God’s fundamental nature and dynamism and an aspect of human existence, there is a sense in which, in the Hebrew Bible, spirit is used to refer to entities which have a separate existence and can act on human beings. Some are good, while others are bad. Sometimes good spirits from God are depicted as descending suddenly on people and making them act on the spur of the moment (1 Chr 12:18). At other times, they are depicted as charisms residing in and guiding persons charged with special functions (1 Sam 10:1, 5–7; Isa 42:1; 61:1). Very often investiture with the spirit produced phenomenal changes in the person concerned, i.e., the judges who had great courage and wisdom in Israel (Judg 3:10; 6:34; 11:29) and Samson who had great strength. In two instances we learn of personal, transferable spirits through which power and authenticity were imparted, such as the spirit of Moses (Num 11:25) and the spirit of Elijah (2 Kings 2:9, 15).

As entities distinct from God, some spirits in the Hebrew Bible may be described as evil in the sense that they invite people to evil actions (Gen 6:1–4; Lev 16:6–10, 26; Isa 34:14; Job 6:4; Ps 91:5). From 1 Kings 22:19–23, however, it appears that sometimes evil may just be a function rather than a characterization of the spirit concerned.⁶ But little was made of this idea in Hebrew thought until the late post-exilic period. Then the belief developed that there existed not only numerous evil spirits or demons, but also a leader for all these evil forces. This leader came to be known in Jewish thought by several titles, though the most common designation was Satan. As a result of this way of thinking, the idea developed that there were armies of demons under the leadership of Satan or the devil doing battle with God and God’s allies. But the word Satan (accuser, enemy, adversary) could refer to the function of a spirit that tests and accuses people before God. Apparently, any of the “sons of God” could be charged with this function. It could also be a proper name referring to an evil spirit as in 1 Chr 21:1. Another comparable proper name we find is Azazel, the wilderness demon, on whom the guilt of Israel was laid according to the rite of the Great Day of Atonement (Lev 16).

In his Dictionary entry on “Spirit of the Dead,” J. Tropper analyzes the use of the Hebrew term *’ōb* occurring seventeen times in the Hebrew Bible.⁷ Despite scholarly consensus that the term relates to necromancy and consultation of the spirits of the dead, Tropper maintains that its precise meaning and etymology are still disputed.⁸ Having established that it is a genuine Hebrew term, which strictly

⁵ The word “soul” reflects a complex of ideas which go back to Greek philosophy as something distinct from the body and immortal. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the word “soul” is the translation of the Hebrew word *nepes̄*, which cannot be signified by any single word in modern languages. It means life, self, the seat of appetites and emotion.

⁶ J. Tropper, “Spirit of the Dead,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), col. 1524–25.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

speaking occurs in this form only in the Hebrew Bible, Topper goes on to describe the many expressions for the deified ancestral spirits among other Semitic cultures of ancient West Asia, particularly in Ugarit and Akkadian, which are comparable in both form and content. It is well known that both at Ugarit and in Mesopotamia the spirits of the dead were the objects of cultic veneration.⁹ Ancient West Asian literature is replete with instances of spirits, which could be summoned or sent back to the netherworld by means of magical incantation. There existed in Mesopotamia an entire series of incantations, the object of which was the expulsion of malign spirits of the dead. There is a related series of specifically necromantic rituals so that the people could “see” them, could “speak” with them and, with their help, “make a decision” in difficult situations.¹⁰

Nine of the seventeen occurrences of *’ôb* (translated as ghosts) are used with the parallel term *yidde’onîm*, familiar spirits, and accompanied by verbs and expressions such as “to apply oneself” (Lev 19:31; 20:6), “to seek out” (Lev 19:31), “to have recourse to in order to inquire of” (Isa 8:19; 19:3) and “to whore after” (Lev 20:6). Mentioned mostly in the context of foreign cults, other gods and idols, the terms are identified with their physical cultic representations, namely things capable of being produced (2 Kings 21:6; 2 Chr 33:6) and destroyed (1 Sam 28:3; 28:9; 2 Kings 23:24). The numerous *’ôb* are branded as mere products of human artifice and lifeless material in the many pronouncements against idolatry. The manufacture of such cultic images is associated with the introduction of cultic idolatry and the destruction of these images with the elimination of idolatry. It is typical of the perspective of Deuteronomistic history that the “good” kings such as the young Saul (1 Sam 28:3,9) and King Josiah (2 Kings 23:24) sought to eliminate the *’ôb* cult, whereas the evil kings like Manasseh (2 Kings 21:6) promoted the *’ôb* cult. Equating ancestor cult with idol worship is a clear indication that the ancestors were the objects of cultic veneration by their descendants. In accordance with the dictum in Lev 19:31, anyone who followed the practices of the ancestral cult was “culturally” unclean.¹¹

Five occurrences of the term imply necromancy and deal with the direct interrogation of the dead. The verb “to inquire/ask” functions as a *terminus technicus* for directing inquiry to the ancestors (Deut 8:11; 1 Chr 10:13). 1 Samuel 28:7 tells us that there were specialists who invoked the dead; and in the specific case recorded in this passage, it was a woman, the “mistress of the *’ôb*.” The existence of such a profession shows that the invocation of a departed spirit was considered a dangerous venture requiring knowledge of certain rituals. According to 1 Samuel 28:8, the necromancer was able to divine by the *’ôb*. The statement is ambiguous and could be understood to mean that the mistress of the *’ôb* functioned as the medium of the ghost, so that the voice of the dead sounded through her.¹²

Two occurrences of the term *’ôb* suggest fortune telling. According to Leviticus 20:27, there are people who have an *’ôb* in them and thus serve as medium for

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

the *'ōb*. Such people were considered capital offenders in Israel and subject to death by stoning. The voice of the *'ōb* is described as “softly whispering” and “murmuring.” Hence the assumption that in later Israelite history the phenomenon of necromancy was transformed into mere fortune telling by means of a medium and thus losing its connection with the ancestral cult. *'ōb* divination thus came to be equated with the divinatory activity of “vetrioloquizing” a phenomenon widespread in the Hellenistic cultural sphere.¹³ We can conclude that in the Hebrew Bible the term *'ōb* primarily signified the deified spirit of the ancestor and subsequently the cultic representation of the ancestor, the ancestral image. It can designate the phenomenon of the veneration as such as well as the necromantic practices it involved. The term later came to be associated with the divinatory or soothsaying spirit in general. Basically all the attested occurrences of the term except for Job 32:19, emphasize that such divination was incompatible with the monotheistic cult of Yahwism. Such activities were therefore considered “foreign” in the sense of “Canaanite” (Deut 18:9–12) and thus punishable by death (Lev 20:27).

Inter-testamental literature¹⁴

During the centuries immediately preceding the coming of Christ, the concept of “spirit” was elaborated in various directions among Jews. It was during this period that a vast hierarchy of heavenly powers came to be envisioned, referred to as angels or spirits (1 Enoch 15:4–10).¹⁵ Hellenistic influences led to a greater contrast between spirit and body.¹⁶ Some scholars suggest that exposure to Iranian dualism led to speculation, especially at Qumran, about the perpetual conflict between the two spirits (or angels) of light and darkness, of righteousness and evil.

The apocryphal book of Tobit, likely to have been written in the first quarter of the second century BCE, links sickness and death with demons. The author also notes in passing the ineffectiveness of physicians to meet human needs. Thus Tobit’s blindness, caused by sparrow droppings, could not be cured by the physicians whom he consulted (Tob 2:10), but the cure was affected by the same means—the entrails of a fish—as drove out the demon (Tob 6:7, 17; 8:1–3; 11:8–14). It is not by chance that the name of the man/angel who guides Tobit

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Inter-testamental literature is literature that was generated in the period between the Old Testament and the New Testament in the second and first centuries BCE. They are the many extra biblical books written for special groups and sects that were gradually excluded from consideration as inspired books, and sometimes thought of as dangerous and heretical. While some of these books are termed “apocrypha” meaning “hidden” from public readings or acceptance by the synagogues and churches (Protestant canon), and deuterocanonical (Catholic canon), others are called “pseudepigrapha” or “false writings” for not having been part of any canon of Scripture.

¹⁵ The book of 1 Enoch is a pseudepigraphical book written in the middle of the second century.

¹⁶ Howard Clark Kee, *Medicine, Miracle & Magic in New Testament Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 23.

to visit his kinfolk, to claim his bride, to drive off the demon that caused her first seven husbands to die on their wedding nights, and brings him home and enables him to cure his father's blindness is Raphael: that is God heals.

1 Enoch 6–11 tells the story of the cohabitation of the fallen angels with beautiful earthly women, and the consequent corruption of humankind through the angels teaching humankind charms and enchantments (1 Enoch 7:1; 8:3) and disclosing the eternal secrets which were to have remained in heaven (1 Enoch 9:6). The warning to Noah of the destruction of the race is followed by instructions to Raphael to bind the wicked angels and to prepare them for eternal judgment, even while proclaiming to earth that it will be healed (1 Enoch 10:4–7). What differentiates the outlook of 1 Enoch from that of Tobit on the matter of demonic powers is that Enoch depicts the fallen angels as adversaries, not merely of human beings but also of God. They have sought to wrest control of creation from God, but their doom in fire, torment and prison is sure (1 Enoch 10:13–14).

Jubilees which probably dates from the middle of the second century BCE, manifests kinship with both Sirach and Enoch. With Sirach, Jubilees shares the notion that medical remedies, especially herbs are part of the created order and have been revealed to the chosen ones among God's people (Jubilees 10:10–14).¹⁷ Like Enoch, Jubilees represents the fallen angels, and especially their leader, Mastema, as the instruments that wreak destruction and ruin on disobedient humanity. God, who alone can control these demonic powers (Jub 10:6), removes most of them from earth, but leaves some behind to perform their evil work as instruments of God's judgment on humanity (Jub 10:7–8). The kinds of acts they perform are detailed in Jubilees 48, where the plagues that came upon Egypt were the direct actions of God (Jub 48:5–7), while Mastema enabled the Egyptians to harass Moses and the children of Israel. Then a striking statement is made, "the evils indeed we permitted them (i.e., Mastema and the Egyptians) to work, but the remedies we did not allow to be wrought by their hands" (Jub 48:10). The dualistic outlook of Jubilees, like that of the New Testament writers, is provisional, not absolute. Human ailments and disasters are performed by the demonic powers, but are permitted by God to happen. Ultimately, the powers of evil will be overcome, and the final and eternal restoration of the creation will occur.

New Testament and Qumran¹⁸

It is the New Testament, which specifically states that "God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:24). It is the New Testa-

¹⁷ The book of Jubilees is another pseudepigraphical book written also in the second century.

¹⁸ The scrolls and documents found in the caves around Qumran have become one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century. The scrolls are traditionally believed to have been the work of the Essene community, a sect that emerged during the first century CE in response to the influence of the Hasmonean and Roman governments upon Judaism. Among the many scrolls discovered at Qumran are biblical texts in Hebrew, a good number of commentaries on the Prophets in Aramaic and several

ment which has the developed doctrine of the Holy Spirit; but the Hebrew Bible, in spite of its rich anthropomorphisms in speaking of God, implies frequently that God is spirit, and speaks of the Spirit of God as manifest in activity in nature and in the lives of human beings in a variety of ways.

The Bible also speaks of creatures, which are spirit or spirits, created by God and subject to God but not having corporeal form. Their existence and their influence on human life are referred to in a number of places (1 Kings 22:21; Job 4:15; Lk 24:39; Acts 23:8). They may be good spirits ministering to human beings (Heb 1:14), or they may be evil (Judg 9:23; 1 Sam 16:14ff.; Mt 10:1). Human beings may be subject to the spirit of God, or to the one who is described as “the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (Eph 2:2). False teachers are those who are led by “deceitful spirits” (1 Tim 4:1), and because of the existence of such it is necessary for Christians to “test the spirits to see whether they are of God” (1 Jn 4:1).

In the New Testament as in the Hebrew Bible, we meet evil spirits as personified entities. These are demon, *daimonian/daimon*, devil, *diabolos*, and Satan, *Satanos*. Demons have the general designation “unclean spirits,” *pneuma akathartos*. They possess people and afflict them with severe diseases. They disseminate error among Christians and seduce them from the truth (1 Tim 4:1). *Daibolos*, slanderer, false accuser, and *Satanos*, adversary, are used interchangeably in the New Testament to refer to the prince of demons. In Matthew 12:24, Beelzebul appears as a proper name for the prince of demons and in 2 Cor 6:15, another proper name *Belial* is found. He also inflicts diseases (Lk 13:16).

The idea that demons could invade human bodies and personalities and cause mental illness, physical disease or other specific problems such as deafness or blindness is clearly reflected in the New Testament where Jesus is characteristically shown as one who exorcises demons (Mt 8:28–34; Mk 5:1–20; Lk 8:26–39; Mt 12:22–32; Mk 3:22–27; Lk 11:14–23).¹⁹

According to Pimental, the language of purity and defilement is an important aspect of the exorcism stories of the Gospel of Mark. Although it appears to use demons and unclean spirits synonymously, an examination of Mark’s accounts of exorcisms suggests that the latter is what he meant. The nearest parallel we have to the assumption of the synoptic gospels that unclean spirits enter and influence human beings are the Dead Sea Scrolls. They too use the language of purity and pollution in this context. The Dead Sea Sect believed that the battle between good and evil was being fought in the spiritual realm between the spirits of light and those of darkness. This cosmological battle has important consequences for the psychological struggle between good and evil going on within people.²⁰

special documents, which belong to the Essene community’s way of life such as the Community Rule also known as the Manual of Discipline (IQS), and the War Scroll sometimes titled the War of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness (IQM).

¹⁹ Paul J. Achtemeier, “Demon,” *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 236.

²⁰ Peter Pimental, “The Unclean Spirits of St. Mark’s Gospel,” in *Expository Times*, 99 (1988), 173–175.

The War Rule Scroll of Qumran is concerned primarily with the cosmological battle:

Thou hast created us for thyself [...]. And the Prince of Light Thou hast appointed from ancient times to come to our support; [all the sons of righteousness are in his hand], and all the spirits of truth are under his dominion. But Belial, the Angel of Malevolence, Thou has created for the Pit; his [rule] is in Darkness and his purpose is to bring about wickedness and iniquity. All the spirits of his company, the Angels of Destruction, walk according to the precepts of Darkness; (1QM 13).²¹

In the Community Rule this war between the two spirits is seen as also being fought within people:

He has created man to govern the world and has appointed for him two spirits in which to walk until the time of his visitation: the spirits of truth and falsehood. Those born of truth spring from a fountain of light, but those born of falsehood, spring from a source of darkness. All the children of righteousness are ruled by the Prince of Light and walk in the ways of light, but all the children of injustice are ruled by the Angel of Darkness and walk in the ways of darkness (1QsS 3).²²

Pimental maintains that by careful observance of the purity rules, the community at Qumran believed they were preparing for the final battle. This meant withdrawal into the desert to protect themselves from contamination by the wicked that are under the dominion of Satan and will be destroyed by the rule of God at work through the dominion of the community. Both the Pharisees and the Qumran community tried to establish a sacred realm (or dominion) which provided protection from the spirit world already at work in the wicked. It is against this background that the term “unclean” is to be understood in the Gospel of Mark.²³ In all exorcism stories (Mk 1:23–28; 5:1–20; 7:24–30; 9:14–29) the term “unclean spirit” is used. A distinction between the unclean nature of spirits and the holy nature of Jesus is being made. The end of the old world and the beginning of the new could only be pictured as the destruction of the unclean. Even the members of the community were not immune to the influence of the spirits of falsehood and so they looked forward to eschatological salvation.

The apostle Paul understood the “principalities” and “powers” to be evil forces in this world (Rom 8:38; cf. Col 1:16; 2:15; Eph 3:10; 1 Cor 10:20). In some of the later New Testament writings, however, the place of the demons began to give way to the centrality of the leader of the demonic forces, namely Satan or the devil. Thus in the fourth gospel there are no references to demon possession or exorcism. The devil has become the instigator of evil (Jn 13:2).²⁴ 1 Peter 3:19

²¹ Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York/London: Allen Lane/Penguin Press, 1997), 177.

²² *Ibid.*, 101.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Achtemeier, *op. cit.* (note 19), 237.

mentioned the “spirits in prison.” Much effort has been expended to define and identify these spirits. Four views have been identified.²⁵

- The first is that they are Noah’s human contemporaries who refused to heed Noah’s preaching while, by delaying the flood, God gave them the opportunity to repent.
- Others believe that the preexistent Christ preached through Noah to Noah’s contemporaries, and that they rejected the message hence ending up as “spirits in prison” which is what they are now.
- They are angelic beings, although they could also be human spirits. But they are fallen angels (watchers) as known especially in the Enoch traditions (cf. Jude 6; 2 Pet 2:4) which claim that the “sons of God” (Gen 6:1–4) descended to earth and mated with women of the earth and taught humanity evil practices which attained high proportions by the time of Noah. These “sons of God” were therefore responsible for the corruption of humanity, which led to the flood. Subsequently they were confined in a prison, which 1 Enoch locates beneath the earth and 2 Enoch locates as the second of the seven heavens.
- The spirits are not watchers but evil spirits derived from them. According to 1 Enoch the watchers are no longer active in the world, but the spirits of their children, the giants, became the evil spirits who continue to promote evil in the world until the last judgment. These spirits would be the evil spirits often mentioned in the gospels. Christ’s proclamation of his victory in order to receive their submission would be more relevant.

The idea that there are evil forces in the world that manifest themselves in various ways is still valid. How one articulates this idea may change from one culture to another. However, demonology was a part of the culture of the New Testament world and should be interpreted and understood against that background.

Conclusion

Where do these spirits come from? In the Hebrew Bible it is clear that they come from God and are under God’s control, though it does appear that sometimes Satan did act without reference to God (1 Chr 21:1). Even so, such actions would appear to be within the divine plan.

It is striking how rarely the Satan notion is expressed in the Hebrew Bible. It would be safe to conclude that in the true religions of Israel, the figure of the heavenly Satan is not of central importance and that there is no rigid consistency in the conception of this figure in different times and circles. But the Hebrew Satan

²⁵ Richard Bauckham, “Spirits in Prison,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 177–78.

embodies the threat to humankind from the world of God. Whether as prosecutor of ethical faults or as a demonic and destructive principle, it is firmly anchored in the plan of salvation.²⁶ The positive and nondualistic integration into the divine government is the distinguishing feature of the Hebrew view as compared not only with the Persian ideas but as also with those of post canonical writings. Consultation of the dead and divination practices were condemned by law and those who offered such services were punishable by death. Such practices were equated with idolatry and characteristic of cults that worshipped the “no gods.”

The New Testament takes the existence of evil spirits for granted. They constitute a kingdom in opposition to God’s kingdom. It was Jesus’ mission to destroy this kingdom and establish God’s kingdom.

While I am not sure if I can take any definite position on the issue of spirits, I will say that the possibility of the existence of a realm of spirits, whether good or evil, contributes to people’s ability to cope with suffering and pain in the world. I also think that such a belief contributes to our need for God because it is our belief that only God can subdue these spirits. I think one needs to employ what a colleague of mine calls “intelligent faith”²⁷ to be able to discern and respond to the so-called realm of the spirits.

From Monica J. Melanchthon, “Spirits: The Biblical View” in *Ancestors, Spirits and Healing in Africa and Asia: A Challenge to the Church*, LWF Studies 2005/01 (Geneva, The Lutheran World Federation, 2005), 131-142.

²⁶ Gerhard von Rad, “OT View of Satan,” in *TDNT*, vol. 2, 75.

²⁷ Dr Jacob Thomas.

The Discourse at the Margins: A Feminist Approach to Religious Plurality

Helene Egnell

When women meet for interfaith dialogue, it is a discourse at the margins. In this essay, I shall argue that this marginality is not a problem, but an asset. The margins are a dynamic and creative space, where traditions can be reshaped and identities negotiated through the interchange of women's and other marginalized groups' experiences of lived faith.

"The margins is a good place for dialogue," so Diana L. Eck in a report on the World Council of Churches' consultation on women and interfaith dialogue in 1988 at Toronto.¹ In many aspects, marginality appears to be a central concept in the context of feminism and interfaith dialogue. I have found that interfaith dialogue among women is a discourse at the margins, making conscious use of this marginality.

First, women meet in the shared experience of being marginalized in their respective religious traditions, of being "the other." In my dissertation, *Other Voices. A Study of Christian Feminist Approaches to Religious Plurality East and West*, I studied various women's interfaith projects and conferences. What characterized these initiatives was that a "common we" quickly evolved, based partly on the conscious employment of a methodology to create a safe space through building relations, partly on the shared experience of being marginalized by patriarchal religious traditions and on the critique against and commitment to changing these traditions.

Second, marginalized religious groups are part of the dialogue. The 1988 WCC conference in Toronto was maybe not the first to involve Native American religious traditions, but it was the first to bring Native American religious tradition into multilateral dialogue and to bring representatives of Wicca² into a WCC interfaith dialogue.

Third, it appears that in interfaith projects involving women, the so-called "dialogue of life" is always present as a basis for dialogue. To a large extent, this is connected to the so-called "little traditions," or "religion as practiced," of which women are the custodians and which scholars and official representatives of the male dominated "great traditions," or "religion as prescribed," often regard as being marginal.

Finally, most of the women's interfaith projects I described in my dissertation are all but forgotten. For example, the great WCC women's conference in Toronto

¹ Diana L. Eck, "Moderator's Report, Working Group on Dialogue: 'Women and Interfaith Dialogue—The Experience of the Toronto Consultation'," in *Current Dialogue* 16 (August, 1989), 20.

² Wicca is a nature based religion found in various countries throughout the world.

1988 is not mentioned as a major interfaith event on the WCC Web site, and has had virtually no impact on the WCC's interfaith work. Every time women meet in an interfaith setting, it is considered a novelty, a "groundbreaking event."³ This means that the experiences from women's interfaith initiatives are not taken into account when helping to facilitate interfaith dialogue.

Margins—borders

But marginality is not only accidentally an aspect of women's dialogue projects. First, there is an awareness of the need to bring marginalized voices into the dialogue—not only women's voices, but also those of other marginalized groups such as aboriginals, Dalits, the disabled and GLBT (Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender) persons.

According to one of the participants in the Women's Interfaith Journey, a project run by the Henry Martyn Institute in Hyderabad, in every society there is always a "key issue" which interfaith dialogue must deal with. According to her, in the case of India, the key issue is the caste system.⁴ Dialogue must take its vantage point in the perspective of the oppressed.

Second, and most important, there is an awareness that "the margins are a good place for dialogue," and that "the reach is not so far," as Diana Eck said. It implies that "the investment in centrist positions is not so great" as when people from the center meet in dialogue.⁵ There is less vested interest in orthodox positions, less need to defend one's own tradition—instead a greater readiness to criticize one's own tradition. This is the critical part of a feminist theology of religions at the margins.

The margins are a very lively and creative area. For me, Eck's expression "the reach is not so far" invokes the image of the margins of two religious traditions as a border between two countries. People who live along two sides of a border often have much in common, perhaps as much if not more so than with people who live in the capital. The language often merges into a kind of common dialect—at least that is the case along the borders between Sweden and Norway, or Sweden and Finland. Interchange and commerce take place at the borders; some of it legal, some maybe not. In the case of religions, we can understand the "great tradition" as the capital, and the "little tradition" as the borderland.

³ This is how in 2003 a program with women discussing interfaith issues at the Tanenbaum Centre for Interreligious Understanding in New York was presented—fifteen years after the WCC consultation in Toronto.

⁴ Helene Egnell, *Other Voices. A Study of Christian Feminist Approaches to Religious Plurality East and West*. Studia Missionalia Svecana (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2006), 72.

⁵ Eck, *op. cit.* (note 1), 20.

Reshaping traditions

Postmodern cultural theories claim that cultures are not unified wholes, with clear borders, into which foreign elements cannot be incorporated without destroying the whole. Rather, cultures are in constant flux, constituted by the processes taking place at the margins, or the borders, where elements from neighboring cultures are tested, incorporated and changed in the process. So the borders are dynamic and creative places.

The same can be said of religious traditions. In *Theories of Culture*, Kathryn Tanner claims that Christianity, as all other religions, is constantly changing due to the influence of culture, society and other religious traditions. According to Tanner, “the distinctiveness of a Christian way of life is not so much formed *by* as *at* the boundary; Christian distinctiveness is something that emerges in the very cultural processes occurring at the boundary.”⁶

Drawing on Tanner’s reflections on Cultural Theory, Sheila Greeve Davaney claims that Christian identity is a common focus for engagement, debate over beliefs and interpretations, rather than agreement. This debate takes place within the boundaries of the Christian community, but “the recognition that humans are multitraditioned and, hence, don’t reside neatly within those confines, that traditions are not utterly impermeable to each other [...] all suggest that wider debate, with all its problems, must also be developed.”⁷

Although Tanner and Davaney do not have interfaith dialogue in mind, I find that their thoughts can be applied to this area. The boundaries of religious traditions are a dynamic field where exchange occurs and change is achieved. Today there is a conscious movement to transform religious traditions, of which the feminist movement is a part. All religious traditions are being reshaped by women, who often make use of the marginalized elements of their tradition to enhance the liberating, life-giving qualities of religious faith.

One biblical story, which is highlighted in both feminist theology and the theology of religions,⁸ is Jesus’ encounter with the Syrophenician/Canaanite woman in Mark 7:24–30/Matthew 15:21–28. For me it is symbolic that this story takes place in a borderland, “near Tyrus and Sidon.” This is where Jesus meets a woman of another faith and culture, who challenges his understanding of his mission and transforms it.

⁶ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture. A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1997), 115.

⁷ Sheila Greeve Davaney, “Continuing the Story, but Departing the Text: A Historicist Interpretation of Norms in Theology,” in Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (eds), *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 213–214.

⁸ For examples of this, see Egnell, op. cit. (note 4), 220–221 and 257–258.

Change, otherness and difference

Change is a key word in the areas of feminism and interfaith dialogue. This is closely connected to the perspective of marginality. Eck observed that at the Toronto consultation changing religious traditions were not seen as being threatening to women. Rather, it was seen as “normative”—the participants at the conference perceived that religious traditions are always changing, that this is good and that they were actively engaged in changing their traditions.⁹ If interfaith dialogue from a feminist perspective takes place at the margins, or borderland, where the “little tradition” is in focus and one is aware of processes of change and willing to evaluate elements from other traditions, then it could be extremely dynamic and creative.

Another key word connected to marginality is “the other.” Interfaith dialogue is basically about how I relate to the religious other. Women have experienced being defined as “the other” in many ways, also within their religious traditions. In our encounter with “other others,” we can make use of this experience, which can be defined as an experience of marginality.

The concepts of difference and diversity appear frequently in feminist reflections on the theology of religions. As a feminist, one is aware that there is great variety within one’s own religious tradition, and is ready to embrace this diversity. Feminist theologians are critical of those brands of theology of religions which either want to minimize differences between religions or reify them. Difference should not be regarded as a problem, but an asset in dialogue.¹⁰

Are the margins a good place?

We then have to ask whether the margins are really a good place for women, or if we are merely reifying our marginality by keeping the marginalized at the margins? Is it counterproductive to privilege the margins in women’s dialogue? Privileging the margins is a form of epistemological priority that lately has been questioned within feminist theory. And from a postcolonial and postmodern perspective there is the whole question of whether we can really talk of a center and a margin—are there not many centers where different power structures are in place, and diverse places at the margins? Reality is complex, different power structures intersect.

Furthermore, we must question whether the women who take part in interfaith conferences are really marginalized? After all, they are literate, academically trained women who can afford to travel around the world. Can you choose a place at the margins and at the same time claim a place at the center?

I would like to answer those questions as follows. Whereas we no longer have a romantic perception of the margins as having an ontological status of giving the “right” or “true” perspective, we need to pay careful attention to the perspective

⁹ Eck, op. cit. (note 1), 21.

¹⁰ Cf. Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation: A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism* (New York and London: Continuum, 2005).

of the marginalized. It is also true that reality is more complex: there is more than one center and one margin. The dynamics of women's interfaith conferences also reflect the complexity of center-margin dynamics. Women from the global South have pointed to the Western bias in dialogue. For instance, in the case of the Women's Interfaith Journey, Dalits forced Brahmin women to acknowledge their complicity in oppressive structures. While there is an awareness that some women are more marginalized than others, to some degree or another all women have experienced marginalization. This then can be the basis for being in solidarity with those who are more marginalized.

My main point is that according to Cultural Theory the margins are a dynamic place. This is where renewal takes place through encounter: feminist theology, Dalit theology, black theology, are the creative areas of theology today. Therefore, in order to be relevant, interfaith dialogue needs to take place in this dynamic space at the margins.

Can the margins become the center? Or, is the renewal that feminism and other progressive movements stand for destined to remain marginal, and not allowed to change the whole picture? Increasingly, women step into positions within religious institutions previously denied to them. It is a slow process and the outcome remains uncertain. Is it possible to bring the marginalized perspective into the center without either distorting the perspective or becoming/remaining a marginalized "hostage"?

A feminist theology of religions needs to be developed that deepens the reflection about such concepts as "the other," "difference/diversity" and "change." With the help of these concepts, the learnings from women's interfaith projects can be analyzed and developed into tools for renewing interfaith dialogue and the theology of religions.

From Helene Egnell, "The Discourse at the Margins: A Feminist Approach to Religious Plurality" in *Deepening Faith, Hope and Love in Relations with Neighbors of Other Faiths* ed. Simone Sinn (Geneva: the Lutheran World Federation, 2008), 103-108.

Lutheran Theology Between Exclusivism and Openness: Reconsidering the Classical Lutheran Distinctions Between “Creation” and “Salvation”

Notto R. Thelle

Creation and salvation—two different concerns?

My theme is an invitation to reflect on the tension between Lutheran openness to other religions with regard to the involvement in the public (secular) space on the one hand—relief work, healing, culture, education, diakonia, peace, justice, environment, politics—and, on the other, a much more reluctant or even exclusivist attitude when it comes to spiritual issues related to the ultimate questions of salvation. The involvement in the world is primarily related to the first article of faith (God as Creator), while salvation is primarily related to the second article of faith (Christ as savior), emphasized with strong exclusivist *solus/sola* (alone/only) expressions such as “Christ alone,” “Scripture alone,” “grace alone” and “faith alone.” The challenge before us is not the Christocentric position, common to most churches and a vital element in the Lutheran confession but, rather, the problem that arises when creation and salvation appear to be isolated as two separate aspects of God’s involvement in the world.

While I will comment on the “alones” in light of the critical context in which they were formulated, my main focus in the following will be to question the validity of the separation between creation and salvation, and to search for other options in Lutheran theology—also inspired by the wider oikoumene and other religions—for bridging the gap.

Approaching the theme

Since theological reflection is always done from a specific place or position, I shall start with a few brief comments regarding my own background and approach to the theme.

Missionary conversions

I was born at Tao Fong Shan in Hong Kong, in 1941. My father was Karl Ludvig Reichelt’s closest associate in his work among Buddhist monks from the early beginnings in 1922 in Nanjing until Reichelt’s death at Tao Fong Shan in 1952. I have memories of Buddhist monks coming from all over China with the fragrance

of incense clinging to their robes. They greeted us with deep bows and clasped hands. They had brands on their shaven heads as a sign that they had cut their ties to the world and were now wandering in search of the truth.

Reichelt was deeply fascinated by Buddhism and felt a genuine spiritual friendship and closeness to anyone who was seeking the *Dao* (Way). He expected that in the future the best in Buddhism would be integrated as a “brilliant jewel” into the great sanctuary of Christ.¹ He wanted to create a “Christian monastery for Buddhist monks,” an open court for dialogue and the sharing of spirituality. At the same time, he wanted to convert the monks and this led to some inherent tensions in his missionary work.²

“He had gone out to change the East and was returning himself a changed man,” wrote an American observer about the generation of missionaries who came to China around 1900.³ Reichelt was one of the converted missionaries who had come to the Far East with a burning passion for preaching the Christian message but, in the process, discovered that the East had spoken its message to him. In the Far East, these missionaries represented a universal religion; they wanted to change the society to which they had committed their lives. At home, they changed people’s attitude by bringing a new breadth of vision and helping them to appreciate the greatness and worth of the civilizations of the Far East. Many Chinese church leaders at that time also woke up to a much more positive affirmation of their Chinese background. This type of openness toward Buddhism and other religions is a part of my spiritual inheritance.⁴

Lutheran contributions

I am grateful for my Lutheran heritage, even though I recognize considerable limitations in the specific Norwegian brand of pietistic Lutheranism. A basic part of Lutheran identity is the will to reform—*semper reformandum*—to be prepared for encountering new challenges and to be willing to redefine what it means to be church, to be a Christian, to be a human being in this world. I was happy and

¹ Karl Ludvig Reichelt, *Kinas religioner* [China’s Religions] (Stavanger: Det Norske Misjonsselskaps forlag, 1913), 160, 165.

² For a thorough analysis of Reichelt’s work and strategies, see my articles, “A Christian Monastery for Buddhist Monks 1: Karl Ludvig Reichelt’ Sacred Mountains,” in *Ching Feng* (New Series), 6 (2005), 1–35; “A Christian Monastery for Buddhist Monks 2: Buddhist Rhetoric in Christian Liturgies,” in *Ching Feng* (New Series) 6 (2005), 131–77.

³ Earl H. Cressy, “Converting the Missionary,” in *Asia: Journal of the American Asiatic Association* 19 (1919), 553–56.

⁴ Moreover, for sixteen years I was involved in research and interfaith dialogue, working as associate director of the National Council of Churches’ Center for the Study of Japanese Religions in Kyoto. Buddhism was the main focus of study and dialogue, but also other Eastern religions, Shinto and numerous new faiths. Returning to Norway in 1985, and serving for twenty years as a professor of ecumenics and missiology at the University of Oslo, I could pursue interfaith dialogue through teaching and theological reflection.

inspired when I discovered that the aspect of conversion is commented on in the document “The Mission of the Church in Multi-Faith Contexts,” which speaks openly about the need for continuous transformation. “In interfaith dialogue our eyes may be opened, we ourselves may be ‘converted’... .” The encounter with others may transform our “understanding and appreciation of God’s grace and presence in human society.”⁵

From 1986 onward I was involved in the LWF study project on interfaith issues participating at a number of international conferences. The first meeting was held in Geneva in 1986, where the theme was religious pluralism with special regard to the Lutheran heritage.⁶ The concern was not only to motivate and prepare Lutheran theologians and church leaders to involve themselves in dialogue and to deal seriously with pluralism. A major theme or sub-theme was to search for specific Lutheran contributions to interfaith dialogue. Can we offer insights that are unique to our tradition?

Lutheran “yes” and “no” to other religions

One of the characteristics of the Lutheran tradition is its understanding of the two kingdoms, the secular and the spiritual. The secular world is the arena for God’s activity, and every Christian is expected to serve God through their active involvement in society. While there are certain weaknesses in such a concept, the positive affirmation that secular society is the place where one is expected to serve God—and not primarily such spiritual arenas as monastic life and specific religious practices—has created an openness toward the wholehearted involvement in the public (secular) space. A corresponding openness toward God’s revelation in creation has enabled Lutherans to cooperate with other religions in the public space and to recognize that God may be known among people of other faiths.

First, the obvious biblical basis for this expectation is that God, being the creator, can somehow be known through God’s creation. God has not let Godself without testimony, as Paul proclaims according to Acts (14:17). God spread humankind all over the face of the world “so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17:27f.). What is known of God is open to how we perceive God, ever since the creation of the world: God’s invisible attributes, eternal power and divine nature (Rom 1:20). Paul also writes about the Law that is written in the hearts of humankind (Rom 2:15). Even though the last two statements are formulated in a critical evaluation of pagan worship (idolatry), they express a surprising openness to the potential knowledge of God.

⁵ The Lutheran World Federation, *For the Healing of the World: Assembly Study Book for the LWF Tenth Assembly*, Winnipeg, Canada 2003 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation 2002), 167.

⁶ J. Paul Rajashekar (ed.), *Religious Pluralism and Lutheran Theology*, LWF Report 23/24 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1988).

Against this background it is not surprising that some twentieth-century Lutheran theologians were convinced of God's revelation in creation (*Schöpfungsoffenbarung*) or original revelation (*Uroffenbarung*), to use Paul Althaus's expressions. The American theologian Carl E. Braaten followed Althaus's theology to a large extent, while Paul Tillich wrote about a general revelation in the human experience of "being grasped by an ultimate concern."

Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of life.⁷

Carl Heinz Ratschow argues that "the first mover in all religions is God's irresistibility,"⁸ and distinguishes between God's saving acts (*Heilshandeln*) and God's work in this world (*Welthandeln*), where the divine mystery "shines through." Wolfhart Pannenberg seems to accept that God's saving acts also happen through (secular) history, but argues that this activity is open and ambiguous and only finds its final form at the end of history.⁹

The above-mentioned theologians—and many others—are in various ways quite open to other religions: Althaus suggests that when people encounter God in Christ, they do not meet God as a stranger; Tillich's concept of "being grasped" is a passive notion, an expression of undeserved grace; Ratschow expects that the divine mystery "shines through"; and Pannenberg argues that God's saving acts may happen through secular history. Even Carl E. Braaten accepts that we should be free to "waffle somewhere between reverent speculation and silent agnosticism"¹⁰ concerning the question how God is working "within the religions to orient them to the future salvation revealed in Christ."¹¹ I agree with him that it must be possible to maintain the Christian understanding that the ultimate meaning of history is revealed in Jesus Christ, and that the universality of Christ "is something that is being worked out through the interaction of the religions and will be established for all eyes to see only at the end of history."¹²

⁷ Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 4.

⁸ Carl Heinz Ratschow, "Die Religionen und das Christentum," in *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 9 (1967), 105.

⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Erwägungen zu einer Theologie der Religionsgeschichte," in *Grundfragen systematischer Theologie: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 252–95. For a general review of Lutheran and Reformed positions, see Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Towards the Other Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 98–108; and Knitter's *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 33–42.

¹⁰ Carl E. Braaten, "Lutheran Theology and Religious Pluralism," in Rajashekar, op. cit. (note 6), 125.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

The solution is probably not to abandon the “alones” of the Lutheran Reformation, but to interpret them in a wider context than the conflicts of the early sixteenth century. The commitment to “God in Christ” should be combined with an open ear to the insights gained by dialogue with other religions and ideologies, giving them a meaningful place in God’s work in the world. The main obstacle in this process is probably not the “alones” of Lutheranism, but the sharp distinction between “creation” and “salvation,” and the tendency to relate justification by faith one-sidedly to Christ’s propitiatory suffering and death on the cross.

Conflict and crisis shaping identity

Lutheran theology was formulated in a time of crisis. The main challenge was the medieval church with its traditions and aberrations, its enormous power, hierarchies and traditions and need to reform. Luther was one of many reform-minded people who wanted change, and it began with an invitation to dispute the indulgences in 1517.

In such times of crisis and conflict, weapons are drawn, positions become more uncompromising and formulations sharper. Luther’s challenge was to find a position that enabled him to encounter a church with an overwhelming authority: political and religious power, a well-established power of definition with councils, papal bulls, hierarchies and traditions. He needed an absolute authority and chose Scripture alone. He needed formulations with which he could stand and fall: justification by faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone. Added to this were Luther’s personality and his spiritual experiences. Theology is to an astonishing degree influenced by the biographies and personal crises of those who formulate it.

The Lutheran position was a classical expression of a contextual response, a basic insight that still nurtures our faith, the great gift of the Reformation to the universal church. At the same time, we must realize that now, five hundred years later, we live in a different context with other types of challenges to theology, and we have to face new contexts with new theological reflection.

One of the new contexts is religious pluralism. Religions are not just out there somewhere, and not only challenges for non-Western churches, but also within Western communities. For Luther and his allies other religions were not the main challenge and they had no theology of religion—at least no acceptable theology. We have to accept what Luther said about the Jews as a deplorable fact and come to terms with it. What he said about Islam, about which he actually had some positive things to say, is not really relevant. At the time, Islam was threatening Europe and that is not a good point of departure for our contemporary encounter with Islam.¹³

¹³ Apart from the openness for revelation in creation and the exclusivist “alones,” one might add the pragmatic solution to confessional struggles in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—*cuius regio eius religio* (whose realm, his religion). A problematic side effect of the Lutheran “alones” is the one-sided tendency to use “justification by faith” as the main key to evaluate other religions, which has generally been devalued as “justification by works.”

Even though Luther chose Scripture as his authority in order to encounter the church's overwhelming authority, it is obvious that his reading of the Scripture depended on his context. His criticism of the abuses of the church, not least regarding the understanding of penance and grace, forced him to concentrate on justification by faith as the article by which the church stands and falls. If the central question is, How can I get a gracious God? then the reading of Scripture will be influenced by that. The dominant answer was the concentration on a forensic understanding of justification: God is the judge who for Christ's sake does not judge the sinner, but acquits the guilty. As a result, Lutheran soteriology has one-sidedly been connected with the second article of faith, with less of an awareness of the first and third articles.

The critical context of the reformers meant that a number of other theological themes were not paid much attention. A major part of the great classical tradition, common to both the Eastern and Western churches, was not up for discussion. Luther was concerned about the individual in their relationship to God (*coram Deo*) and, to some extent, to society (*coram hominibus*). Other issues that had to be dealt with were questions of ministry, the sacraments, church order, worship, monasticism, political authorities, church education, social unrest and social order. We have to ask ourselves whether the concentration on these themes meant that Lutheran theology was less prepared for the encounter with new contexts. Neither cosmology, the relationship to "nature" or creation (humankind *coram natura* or *coram creatione*), nor the relationship to other religions (*coram religionibus*) was an urgent theme as they are today.¹⁴ There is certainly a great potential in Luther's writings for theological reflection that goes beyond the central concerns of the Reformation. We have to search for other aspects of Luther's theology and the Lutheran tradition, or reformulate some of the reformatory insights in order to deal with our present context.

Suggestions for further investigation

I have no ambition to deliver a definitive answer to the tension—or contradiction—between the exclusivism of the Lutheran emphasis on *solus/sola* in relation to "salvation" and the spiritual realm, and its relative openness to other religions when it comes to awareness of God in God's "creation" and the secular realm. I will limit myself to one direction where we might search for new inspiration.

Creation theology

The most fruitful area for further research would perhaps be to investigate the potential in Lutheran creation theology: a Trinitarian understanding of God's presence in the world, where Christ's mission and the Holy Spirit's work are

¹⁴ I realize that such Latin concepts as *natura* and *religio* do not necessarily have the same meaning as in our time, but I hope the point is clear enough.

totally integrated in creation theology. If heaven and earth are God's creation it must imply that the entire creation is touched by God's presence. Just as artists sign their works, we may expect creatures to have traces of God's signature. If humankind is created in God's image, then this implies a basic relationship to God in our deepest humanity. Moreover, if the world is created in Christ, for Christ and to Christ, as Paul argues, it must mean that there is also Christ's signature in all created things. If the Spirit is God's creative and life-giving breath, then we may believe that the Spirit blows through all of creation. The work of the Spirit is not only to guide, enlighten and sanctify, but to be the agent of God's creative presence in creation. *Veni Creator Spiritus*.

With such a "high Christology" the revelation in Jesus Christ is related to what was "in the beginning," as we read in 1 John 1:1–3. Jesus' incarnation, life and work, his death and resurrection are manifestations of what was already given in God's act of creation in the beginning.

From a different perspective—one might call it a "low Christology" based on the stories of the gospels—it makes sense to see Jesus as the Creator's presence in the world. In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, "My Father is still working, and I also am working" (Jn 5:17). God's "work" is to create. I believe Jesus' life and work to make sense in creation. When he "saved" people he was doing the Creator's work: he restored that which was broken; healed the sick; gave new life to the downtrodden; forgave sinners; brought justice to the poor and dignity to the marginalized. Such works of creation also meant restoring the community for those who were "inside," for the inside community was also in need of salvation in order to be whole. His suffering, death and resurrection may also be understood from the perspective of creation theology.

Creation theology is more than an affirmation of the world

In traditional Norwegian Lutheran preaching and reflection, the world was affirmed as God's creation, expressed in the first article of faith. But both society and creation were somehow reduced to a mere stage for the real drama: the individual and God, the salvation of the soul and reaching heaven. The first article of faith faded into the background and existed only in the pious rhetoric.

Most of us would agree that Lutheran creation theology is much more than a "yes" to the created order and call to service in the secular world. With Luther's sensibility for God's good creation it would be strange if he had not had important things to say about the divine presence in all created things. Even his *Small Catechism*, written with the farmer's life in mind, gives an intimate image of the Creator who bestows all gifts through the created world. *The Large Catechism* is more detailed: God sustains life with God's gifts through God's creatures. Creatures are the hands, channels and means through which God bestows all blessings. God gives milk to the mother's breast to be given to the child, grains and all kinds of fruit for our nourishment. Luther is not concerned about the "then" of creation, but the "now" of creation. Both creation and salvation are undeserved. God is

certainly exalted, but comes to us in things. To get to know God is to bow down to what we regard as the lowest things.¹⁵

My colleagues have suggested that rather than looking at one text, one has to search for fragments, often in surprising contexts. One example is the description of God's creative power in *The Bondage of the Will*. "God is everywhere and fills all things,"¹⁶ Luther writes, and exemplifies this with dungeons and the sewer. God is even present in the thimble or the beer barrel. God is no less present in the hole of a beetle than in heaven.¹⁷ It sounds panentheistic. Furthermore, in his ethics, Luther says that the neighbor's need is God's call to us. God calls us into the public square through our neighbor. In God we live, move and have our being.

If we take such perspectives seriously, it is difficult to see the created world only as the secondary stage for the real drama, which deals with salvation, heaven and God's otherworldly kingdom. It must mean that this world is the very stage where God is present, restoring, renewing and saving in God's creative presence.

Salvation today

What we need today is a deeper reflection about the meaning of salvation and we are challenged to bridge the gap between "salvation" and "creation."

In the Bible salvation is not necessarily a "religious" word in the sense that it is only concerned with spiritual matters. Salvation is about life as being vulnerable and threatened. A savior is a rescuer for one in need, a helper who comes at the right moment. It may be a judge who resists bribes and pressure and, against all expectations, lets the poor have their right. A savior is the witness who speaks when others are forced to be quiet; the leader who grasps power when the people are about to be destroyed by the enemy; the rescuer of those in distress; the advocate who helps innocent people out of jail; the friend who is present when a prisoner is released. Salvation is to act on behalf of those who are burdened by debt; the sharing of food with the hungry; the saving of a victim of violence. Salvation is showing hospitality to the refugee; giving land to the landless; healing the sick; caring for the weak. Salvation is when the community has room for the rejected; comfort reaches those in despair; acts and words restore the dignity of the despised; words of truth help people to realize their sins; and words of forgiveness are spoken to those who have trespassed.

When Jesus told Zacchaeus that "salvation" had come to his house, it did not mean that he would go to heaven, but that God had restored what was broken in his life: injustice; broken relationships; sin and shame; loneliness; anxiety and meaninglessness. It was not only he himself who was "saved," but his house, and even those he had oppressed and squeezed for money.

¹⁵ Svein Aage Christofferse, Trond Skard Dokka, Trygve Wyller, *Tegn og fortolkning. Teologiske perspektiver på etikk, natur og historie* [Sign and Interpretation: Theological Perspectives on Ethics, Nature and History] (Oslo: Ad Notam Gyldendal, 1996).

¹⁶ Martin Luther, "The Bondage of the Will [1529]," in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 33 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1972), 47.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

Luther's one-sided understanding of salvation as justification by faith, based on his reading of Paul, was a liberating message in order to oppose the belief in salvation by works. However, somehow it tends to limit salvation to the individual relationship to God (*coram Deo*) and relate it one-sidedly to the second article of faith. The central theme of Jesus' message according to the gospels, however, was not justification by faith, but a much broader range of saving acts manifested and proclaimed with the coming kingdom of God. This kingdom is not a specific geographical place or region but, rather, a situation or a state that comes into being there where God rules and saves by restoring and renewing things: a new world; a new community; a new creation. Jesus saved people by doing his Father's work and thus restored the broken creation. He certainly expected a future kingdom in the world to come, but salvation was anticipated in the numerous manifestations of the recreation and restoration of broken relations, suffering and destruction.

Theology of the cross

For the first Christians the death of Jesus was an incomprehensible mystery, and the entire New Testament may be read as their attempt to understand the meaning of his death. Various metaphors are used in the New Testament to interpret the cross: ransom; sacrificial expiation; struggle against death and evil powers; the shepherd who protects the sheep with his life; the friend who gives his life for others; the witness who dies for the truth; the servant who carries the sickness of others; the grain of wheat that dies in order to bear a rich harvest; and several others. With the Lutheran emphasis on salvation as justification by faith alone, understood as a forensic attribution of forgiveness, one is easily stuck with a one-sided emphasis on one of the above-mentioned metaphors: the cross as an act of atonement. The result is a Good Friday theology, concentrated on suffering and substitution. In a more popular and vulgarized form one may hear from preachers: "Jesus came to die on the cross. It happened on Good Friday. What happened before was not so important."

From Luther's perspective it was important that the cross was God the Father's act "in Jesus Christ," but the concentration on substitution and expiation tended to relate salvation only to the second article of faith. One side effect is the numerous distorted images of Jesus' suffering and death that reduce the church's central mystery to an absurd teaching of a God who cannot love before having pacified God's wrath by seeing God's own Son being tortured and crucified. Such distortions have, of course, never been intended by any sane theology, but indicate how problematic it is to stick to one set of metaphors for understanding the mystery of the cross.¹⁸

¹⁸ The distortions are not only seen among critics of Christianity, but even in the rhetoric of faithful believers. In my studies of Buddhist-Christian relations in Japan, there is from the sixteenth century until the present a consistent tendency to regard the teaching of the cross as an absurd and abhorrent idea of a God who cannot love unless his wrath is propitiated by seeing pain and punishment.

A number of Lutheran theologians have contributed to a renewed reflection on the cross and the understanding of God that is expressed in the death of Jesus: Moltmann's theology of the "crucified God," Kazoh Kitamori's "theology of the pain of God," Bonhoeffer's descriptions of a God who gains power in the world by abandoning power. The real experience of transcendence is, according to Bonhoeffer, Jesus' radical "being-for-others" in the midst of the world, and our participation in this "being-for-others." Similar tendencies are expressed in various forms of liberation theology, where the cross is the very symbol of God's identification with the downtrodden, the "crucified people."

A beautiful expression of such a theology of the cross is found in a hymn by the Swedish priest and poet Olov Hartman (1906–1982). With ingenious simplicity he uses the Christ hymn in the Epistle to the Philippians to describe God's who, what and where. God's who—God's deepest essence—we know from Jesus' choice of dishonor and poverty. God's what—the victory and highness—is expressed in the debasement on the cross. God's where is among the suffering and doomed. Only from this perspective does the confession that "Christ is Lord" attain its full meaning, sounding as a song of praise from both the saints and the condemned, from everything that lives and breathes.

A preliminary conclusion

As I conclude my reflections, I discover that the Lutheran "alones" do not disturb me so much. They are exclusive in the sense that they were formulated in a time of crisis when it was necessary to establish an absolute authority: Scripture alone against an all-powerful church; God's radical grace and justification by faith alone against justification by works; commitment to Christ alone against distorted images of God, Christ being the ultimate image of God.

The real concern is to overcome the separation between creation and salvation: taking seriously the biblical understanding that God saves by creating and restoring; seeing Jesus as the Creator's presence in the world and the Christ event as a manifestation of what was "in the beginning"; using the wealth of Lutheran insights into God's creative presence in the world to reach beyond the unbiblical separation of salvation and creation; opening up for our present contexts and challenges—including the wisdom and experiences of other religions—as material for reformulating our commitment to God who was "in Christ."

A Christian mandala of "God in Christ"?

My final remark may seem somewhat abrupt, since I have hitherto avoided making direct use of insights from other religions and have not prepared any bridges for using such insights. Nonetheless, I would like to introduce one set of ideas from Buddhist theologies of religion, which offers a different type of imagination concerning other religions.

Buddhism—in this case Mahayana—has not really been interested in a theology of religions, but has a number of ideas and principles about the relationship

between various Buddhist schools and traditions. The discussions among Buddhist schools or sects about the relationship between absolute truth (represented by their own specific tradition) and secondary truths or heretical views come close to a theology of religion. On the one hand, Buddhism seems to be almost limitless in its tolerance, accepting all sorts of religious expressions. On the other, it may be quite ruthless in its rejection of any teaching that hinders awakening. In other words: openness and exclusivism, tolerance and critique.

I will limit myself to one visual expression of such ideas, depicted in some Buddhist mandalas, in this case the classical “diamond” and “womb” mandalas from the esoteric tradition.

In the center of the mandala, sitting on an open lotus, one would find the Buddha, who in one specific tradition is regarded as the manifestation of the absolute truth, the original essence.

On the eight petals of the lotus one would find other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas representing various Buddhist virtues and ideals, such as wisdom, compassion, endurance, ascetic virtues and healing power. They are all related to the center, but are secondary expressions or “trace manifestations” of the central essence. Outside this central image one would find different types of circles and squares with other Bodhisattvas and divinities, often from the Indian pantheon or indigenous mythologies, who are generally regarded as protectors of the Buddhist dharma. And, finally, far out on the periphery, there are obscure powers and even demonic figures. According to Buddhist thought, all things are interrelated in an endless net of relations. Even the most obscure figures far out in the periphery are somehow related to the center.

The mandala is not merely a graphic description of the cosmos, but has a practical use in spiritual guidance. It is impossible for most people to begin in the center, for very few are prepared for the ultimate. But one may be allotted one figure in the mandala whose virtues one may acquire by identifying oneself with it—through visualization, worship, mantras, movements and positions. One has not reached the center, but is still related to the center and is moving towards it. Applied to a theology of religion this type of imagination comes quite close to some forms of inclusivism in Christian theology.

Is it possible to develop a corresponding Christian mandala? It may invite us to use more visual expressions than our wordy expositions. One challenge is the Buddhist rejection of the dualism that has characterized Christian thinking, with its absolute division between good and evil, divine and demonic, God and Satan, salvation and perdition. In Buddhism such dualism is impossible, since all things are somehow interrelated. Non-Buddhist powers and divinities do not have to be demonized or excluded, but are allotted a place in a great cosmos where they may be transformed and drawn towards the center.

In actual fact, we already have Christian mandalas, not only in Orthodox iconography but also in traditional Western churches. Many sanctuaries are like a mandala: a great cosmos where the altar piece and other adornments and art works are visual expressions of the mystery of faith, concentrated on one point, the revelation in Jesus Christ. The central scene may depict the birth of Christ, the last supper, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the outpouring of the Spirit at

Pentecost, or other images of the creation and other biblical motives, patriarchs, prophets and kings, angels and heavenly creatures. Further out in the sanctuary, one might find important persons and happenings in the life of the church or nation. In some churches you may also find pagan saints and sages included in the Christian mandala. On the periphery one might find as carvings in gargoyles, beams and eaves in old churches, demonic shapes to protect against evil. Everything that is decisive in the entire cosmos—heaven and earth, time and eternity—is potentially described in the sanctuary.

My question is whether we might open the perspective even more and include all the elements of reality: religions, ideologies, political powers and authorities, all ideas and powers, peoples and nations, the entire history and the created world—at least in principle.

If I were an artist, I could have created such a mandala with a very definite center: a visualization of the mystery of faith as I have described above. Around this center not only the Christian history (salvation history) would evolve, but also other religions with their prophets and teachers and teachings, philosophies and ideologies, gathered around corresponding centers of commitment. All peoples and their historical experiences should be included. Elements of these would be close to the center of the Christian faith, perhaps sharing some of it or moving towards it. Other elements would be far from our center or moving away from it, being even in opposition to it. But nothing would be without some sort of connection, untouched or cut away.

The church has to a great extent demonized “alien gods” and been cautious about opening up for unfamiliar conceptions. Perhaps Buddhist modes of thoughts can inspire and challenge us to think greater and more dynamically inclusive than has traditionally been the case. The mandala that I have sketched is vulnerable to critique, but might still function as a visual expression of a universal vision: the God we know in Jesus Christ is present in God’s creation; in God we live and move and have our being; God is not far away from any of us, as Paul says. In his hymnal passages Paul describes how all things—*ta panta*—will give honor to God who ultimately will be “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). Olov Hartman’s above-mentioned interpretation of the Christ hymn from Philippians 2 is a beautiful expression of such a vision. If that is realized, I am sure everything will seem radically different from what we have ever imagined.

This should not be a triumphalistic mandala, but a humble and frank attempt to describe how things are seen from the perspective of our confession to God in Christ, the Creator who saves the world, making all things new. This being our vision, we should at the same time allow others to describe their mandalas with their centers of devotion and then see what happens when they become involved in one another.

From Notto R. Thelle, “Lutheran Theology Between Exclusivism and Openness: Reconsidering the Classical Lutheran Distinction Between ‘Creation’ and ‘Salvation’” in *Interactive Pluralism in Asia: Religious Life and Public Space*, ed. Simone Sinn and Tong Wing-Sze, LWF Studies 2016/1 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2016), 59-72.

On the Use of Religion by Right-Wing Israeli and Christian Groups

Munther Isaac

Introduction

In this paper, I will unpack the ideology and theology of right-wing Israeli religious and nationalistic groups, and that of Christian Zionism. I will argue that both represent a theology of power or an “imperial theology”, which uses biblical and religious language to justify and legitimize their rights and power. These two groups are politically aligned, today, and are similar in the way they use the Bible, and in their “orientalist” perspective regarding Arabs, Muslims and oriental Christians. Both ideologies represent a classic case where religion, ethnicity and nationality are joined to form an ideology of exclusion and power.

The Employment of God: God Is on Israel’s Side

A Chosen State

For Christian Zionist and right-wing Israeli nationalists, the state of Israel is not like any other state. It is an act of God. It is nothing short of the fulfilment of biblical prophecy, and even more than that.

Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu does not shy away from evoking God and the Bible in political speeches. Speaking in front of the United Nations General Assembly in 2013, he concluded his speech by declaring that the state of Israel is the fulfilment of biblical prophecy:

In our time the Biblical prophecies are being realized. As the prophet Amos said, they shall rebuild ruined cities and inhabit them. They shall plant vineyards and drink their wine. They shall till gardens and eat their fruit. And I will plant them upon their soil never to be uprooted again.¹

The use of Amos’ prophecy is designed to emphasize the connection between Israel today and the Israel of the Bible and the land itself, and that the existence of the state of Israel of today is God’s ordained plan.

¹ Full text of Netanyahu’s 2013 speech to the UN General Assembly: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-netanyahus-2013-speech-to-the-un-general-assembly/> (accessed 1 May 2018).

For Christian Zionists, Israel is an act of God. “It’s just the hand of God... This is God’s chosen land as well as God’s chosen people”, as declared recently by an evangelical leader visiting Israel as part of a delegation of evangelical Christians from the United States of America in solidarity with Israel.² Among those in the delegation was former congresswoman and United States of America presidential nominee Michele Bachmann, who expressed her support for President Donald Trump’s declaration on Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. For Bachmann, supporting this declaration “is agreeing with what God Himself said 3,000 years ago—that Jerusalem is the capital.”³

Opposing God

Under this line of thinking, any opposition to the state of Israel or the occupation is deemed anti-Jewish, and, by implication, anti-God. For example, Joel Rosenberg, a *New York Times* bestselling author and a regular Fox News political analyst, wrote that turning against Israel would pose “an existential threat to the future of the United States”, based on the verse in Genesis 12:3.⁴ “This was echoed more recently by Johnnie Moore, the so-called “unofficial spokesman of President Trump’s group of evangelical advisers”, who told White House officials “those who bless Israel will be blessed.”⁵ In fact, even former American President Bill Clinton cited this verse in a speech to the Israeli Knesset in 1994, stating that abandoning Israel is something God will never forgive you for.⁶

Following this line of thought, the modern people of Israel are understood to be the direct descendants of the Israelites in the Bible. As Naftali Bennett, the Israeli minister of education and a leading figure in the right-wing movement, recently affirmed. “We are direct descendants of David”.⁷ Speaking to a select group of Christian media broadcasters, he asked them to picture a time machine

² Chris Mitchell, “*The Hand of God*”: US Christian Leaders in Israel Say Trump’s Jerusalem Embassy Move Is a Path to Blessing: <http://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/israel/2018/april/the-hand-of-god-us-christian-leaders-in-israel-say-trumps-jerusalem-embassy-move-is-a-path-to-blessing> (accessed 1 May 2018).

³ Quoted in *ibid*.

⁴ Joel Rosenberg, *Mounting evidence suggests President Obama preparing to “divorce” Israel. What are the implications if he does?* Online blog in March 2015. <https://flashtrafficblog.wordpress.com/2015/03/27/mounting-evidence-suggests-president-obama-preparing-to-divorce-israel-what-are-the-implications-if-he-does/> (accessed 14 April 2018)

⁵ Michelle Boorstein and Sarah Pulliam Bailey, *With Pence’s Jerusalem embassy news, Trump’s evangelical advisers tick an item off the list*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/01/08/walking-a-line-the-shrewd-tactics-of-the-white-houses-evangelical-gatekeeper/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.1261b7da1e8f (accessed 1 May 2018).

⁶ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000), 1.

⁷ Quoted in: Mayaan Hoffman, *Minister: This Is Our Last Chance to Renew Israel; Don’t Blow It’*. <https://www.breakingisraelnews.com/96438/minister-battle-good-evil-israel-will-prevail/> (accessed 1 May 2018).

in the room that transported the audience back 3,000 years to the time of King David, noting that he and King David would be able to communicate because they both speak Hebrew—the language of the Jewish people.⁸

This connection to the Jewish people is what gives legitimacy to the Jewish state today. For Bennett, the “land of Israel” belongs to the Jews in accordance to the Bible. “If you want to say that our land does not belong to us, I suggest you go change the Bible first”⁹.

Justice Relativized

When following this rationale, even the justice of God is relativized or qualified—it is relative to Christian Zionists’ presuppositions. Daniel Juster, a Messianic Jewish theologian, argues:

If Palestinians refuse to recognize what God says about the Jewish people and their connection to the land of Israel, then suffering will result. (...) Justice in regards to the Land requires that there be a submission to what God has declared about this Land. (...) So if the Palestinians do not acknowledge God’s promise, they are foundationally unjust and are themselves resisted by God and lose their rights in the Land.¹⁰

This lack of empathy and justice has been noted by many. American evangelical theologian Richard Mouw has observed that “evangelicals who are Christian Zionists want to see events unfold, but they aren’t so concerned about justice”,¹¹ while Palestinian human rights activist Jonathan Kuttab wrote that justice is missing in Christian Zionism.¹²

For the Israeli minister of justice, Ayelet Shaked, the argument for settlement construction in the West Bank, which is illegal according to international law, comes straight from the Bible and is related to blood connection to the biblical figures. Standing in front of the Tomb of Abraham in Hebron, she claimed:

I am here, at a time when the world chooses to condemn Israel for [settlement] construction, and I chose to come and to strengthen the Jewish settlement in Hebron... This place belongs to us through historical and legal rights... Abraham our father was

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Aljazeera News. *Israeli minister: The Bible says West Bank is ours*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/upfront/2017/02/israeli-minister-bible-west-bank-170224082827910.html> (accessed 1 May 2018).

¹⁰ Daniel Juster, “A Messianic Jew Looks at the Land Promises”, in Salim Munayer and Lisa Loden (eds), *The Land Cries Out. Theology of the Land in the Israeli-Palestinian Context* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 68-79.

¹¹ Richard Mouw quoted in Robert Smith, *More Desired Than our Own Salvation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 195.

¹² Jonathan Kuttab, “Justice and Mercy: the Missing Ingredients in Christian Zionism”, in: Naim Ateek, Cedar Duaybis, and Maurine Tobin (eds), *Challenging Christian Zionism: Theology, Politics and the Israel-Palestine Conflict* (Herts: Melisende, 2005), 163-68.

Loving your neighbor

present here and began to build a nation that would teach the world what true ethics are. Afterward, King David built his kingdom from here.¹³

This is a remarkable statement from the minister of “justice”. And one should not be surprised to learn that in another speech she claimed that “there is place to maintain a Jewish majority [in Israel] even at the price of violation of rights.”¹⁴

Prejudice and Superiority

Controlling the Narrative

The strong and powerful control the narrative. Language here matters. Consider, for example, the notion that Jews “returned” to “their” land. Does this mean that if someone who is born in Russia today can prove that his grandmother is a Jew, he has more right to live in this land than a Palestinian refugee who was born here and who can trace his roots in the land for hundreds, if not thousands, of years?

We can also speak here about the role of archaeology and historiography, where Palestine is portrayed as “virtually barren, desolate and empty, waiting to be made fertile and populated by Israel.”¹⁵ This narrative was at full display in the speech of the American Vice President Mike Pence to the Israeli Knesset:

Through a 2,000-year exile, the longest of any people, anywhere, through conquests and expulsions, inquisitions and pogroms, the Jewish people held on to this promise, and they held on to it through the longest and darkest of nights. (...) You have turned the desert into a garden, scarcity into plenty, sickness into health, and you turned hope into a future.¹⁶

There is also a double standard when it comes to contemporary realities. Almost every time I speak to a Christian Zionist group, I am asked: “Do you acknowledge Israel’s right to exist?” It is quite amazing to me that the occupied are being asked to recognize the right of their occupiers to exist. Does Israel acknowledge Palestinians’ right to exist?

¹³ Jeremy Sharon, “Israel Must Build and Build in Judea and Samaria after Trump Takes Office”, in: *The Jerusalem Post* <https://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/We-must-build-and-build-in-Judea-and-Samaria-after-Trump-takes-office-477985> (accessed 1 May 2018).

¹⁴ Revital Hovel, “Justice Minister: Israel Must Keep Jewish Majority Even at the Expense of Human Rights”, in *Haaretz News* <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/justice-minister-israel-s-jewish-majority-trumps-than-human-rights-1.5811106> (accessed 1 May 2018).

¹⁵ Basem Ra’ad, “Toward a Real Archaeology and History of Palestine”, in *This Week in Palestine*. Issue No.178, February 2013, <http://archive.thisweekinpalestine.com/details.php?id=3941&edid=215> (accessed on 14 April 2018)

¹⁶ Full Transcript of Pence’s Knesset Speech in *The Jerusalem Post* <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Full-transcript-of-Pences-Knesset-speech-539476> (accessed 1 May 2018).

The same applies to self-defense. Christian Zionists insist that Israel has the right to defend itself. But do Palestinians have the right to defend themselves when their land is confiscated or when settlers burn their fields or homes?

Palestinians Dehumanized

If one follows this ideology, the Palestinians become the unchosen “other”. Like the Canaanites before them, the interest of “people of God” trumps their own value and worth. In 2016, Israel’s chief rabbi Yitzhak Yosef said that in an ideal world non-Jews should not live in the land of Israel (unless they abide by the law).¹⁷

A theology that privileges a group produces prejudice and even bigotry. In the theology of the empire, Palestinians are often viewed as an irrelevant after-thought. They are secondary to the interests of Israel. From the very beginning, even before the birth of Zionism, Lord Shaftesbury (who was president of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews (now known as CMJ), argued for, “A country without a nation for a nation without a country.”¹⁸ Shaftesbury probably knew that the country he was referring to (Palestine) did have a nation or people in it. Following this line of thinking, turned Palestinian Arabs into a “complete irrelevance.” For the Zionists and Christian Zionists, Palestine was ‘empty’, as British journalist Ben White argues, not literally, “but in terms of people of equal worth to the incoming settlers.”¹⁹

This reflects a typical colonial “Christian” mentality. The land had people, but they could be easily moved. Today, many Christians around the world continue to talk of the land as if it were empty. Consider this article in *Christianity Today* published in 2012 under the title: “Do Jews Have a Divine Right to Israel’s Land?” Can you imagine how I, as a Palestinian, felt when seeing the title of this article? What about the people of the land? Does our opinion matter? We just happen to be living here. This is a typical case of two (white) American theologians, sitting in the comfort of their offices, discussing our land—as if it were empty.

Fear

This attitude of marginalizing becomes dehumanizing, even demonizing, and is utilized to create fear. Christian Zionism instills fear. Today, it is so easy to portray the Arabs and Islam as the enemy that we all need to fight and unite against. The world is divided into “good” versus. “evil.” The tragic persecution of Christians in the Middle East provided the perfect opportunity for some to make political

¹⁷ *Times of Israel*. “Chief rabbi: Non-Jews shouldn’t be allowed to live in Israel”. <http://www.timesofisrael.com/chief-rabbi-non-jews-shouldnt-be-allowed-to-live-in-israel/> (accessed 1 May 2018).

¹⁸ Nur Masalha, *Imperial Israel and the Palestinians. The Politics of Expansion* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 4.

¹⁹ Ben White, *Israeli Apartheid: A Beginner’s Guide* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), 20.

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gains. This is why it suits many people in the West to characterize the conflict in Palestine as a religious one, where the good becomes the Judeo-Christian tradition (us), and the evil is Islam (them, the Palestinians). This, in return, justifies actions by Israel as war on terror, or even fighting for the sake of goodness versus evil.

Tony Campolo captures this mentality among American evangelicals:

Sadly, there are many religious leaders in the United States that have organized movements that deem the Arab peoples living in Palestine in such demonic terms. There was a time when it was Communist who we Evangelicals deemed as the devil, but increasingly our animosity has shifted towards the Arab peoples.²⁰

The Israeli minister for education, Naftali Bennett says:

Israel is a force of good in this world... There is one Jewish nation with 6.5 million Jews and this same state is surrounded by hundreds of millions of radical Islamists that want to annihilate us and you. Israel is at the forefront of the battle between the free world and radical Islam.²¹

Not only does Bennett argue that there are “hundreds of millions” of radicals who are getting ready to destroy Israel, spreading fear and demonizing these “radical Islamists”, but we need to notice how he states casually that in opposition, “Israel is a force of good in this world”. By doing this, he sets the world into two opposing forces of “good” versus “evil”. In Pence’s speech to the Knesset, he said:

We stand with Israel because your cause is our cause, your values are our values, and your fight is our fight. We stand with Israel because we believe in right over wrong, in good over evil, and in liberty over tyranny.²²

Judeo-Christian Tradition and Cultural Superiority

One of the common phrases we hear today in many Christian circles is “Judeo-Christian” tradition or values. There is no time to consider the roots of this phrase. At first glance, the phrase seems to affirm the common roots of Christianity and Judaism. Clearly, such an affirmation was and is needed in response to years of anti-Judaism.

The problem, however, is that the term is used today in such a way that it communicates superiority and prejudice. A quote from right-wing Jewish commentator Dennis Prager, who is beloved by conservative Christians, illustrates this:

²⁰ Tony Campolo, “The Ethical Responsibility of the American Church Towards Palestinian Christians”, in: Paul Alexander (ed.), *Christ at the Checkpoint. Theology in the Service of Justice and Peace* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 130.

²¹ Quoted in: Hoffman, op. cit. (note 8).

²² Full Transcript of Pence’s Knesset Speech. *The Jerusalem Post* <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Full-transcript-of-Pences-Knesset-speech-539476> (accessed May 1st, 2018).

Only America has called itself Judeo-Christian. America is also unique in that it has always combined secular government with a society based on religious values. Along with the belief in liberty—as opposed to, for example, the European belief in equality, the Muslim belief in theocracy, and the Eastern belief in social conformity—Judeo-Christian values are what distinguish America from all other countries. That is why American coins feature these two messages: “In God we trust” and “Liberty.”²³

The truth is, the use of the term Judeo-Christian tradition today has come to refer to cultural superiority. Palestinian theologian Mitri Raheb, in fact, argues that the term is “utilized theologically and implicitly against the Palestinian people and within the context of the clash of civilizations against Islam.”²⁴

Conclusion

The theology of Christian Zionism and the ideology of right-wing nationalistic movements in Israel, in their employment of God and in their prejudice and superiority, are indeed “imperial”. By this we mean that they represent a theology and a worldview that serve the purposes of the empires of today at the expense of the weak and defenseless.

Palestinian Christians call for what I call a theology of a *shared land*, which means that all the dwellers of the land share the land and its resources equally and have the same rights—regardless of their ethnicity or religion. A shared-land theology emphasizes that there are no “second-class” citizens in this land. No one is marginalized in God’s vision of the land. A shared land is not simply an option, it is the only way forward. This is the biblical vision and so it must be the prophetic vision of the church in Palestine and Israel. The reality on the ground is that of “walls”, yet what is needed is a vision of “bridges”. Palestinians and Israelis must think collectively in terms of a common future in which they cooperate—not a divided future in which they separate.²⁵

From Munther Isaac, “On the Use of Religion by Right-Wing Israeli and Christian Groups” in *Resisting Exclusion: Global Theological Responses to Populism*, eds. Simone Sinn and Eva Harasta (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2019), 181-188.

²³ Dennis Prager, “What does ‘Judeo-Christian’ mean?,” in *Jewish World Review* March 30, 2004. http://www.jewishworldreview.com/0304/prager_2004_03_30_04.php3 (accessed 14 April 2018)

²⁴ Mitri Raheb, *Faith in the Face of the Empire. The Bible Through Palestinian Eyes* (Bethlehem, Diyar Publisher, 2014), 68.

²⁵ See my book on the land: Munther Isaac, *From Land to Lands, from Eden to the Renewed Earth: A Christ-Centred Biblical Theology of the Promised Land* (London: Langham Monographs, 2015).

Disarm the Hearts and Hands: Words matter! Overcoming Fear with Faith

Martin Junge

The Holocaust did not start with the gas chambers, but with vulgar jokes, provocations and social exclusion. —Hungarian Lutheran Bishop Tamás Fabiny¹

Words matter! It might be tempting for religious leaders to limit our focus to disarmament and non-violence in response to events that appear to be escalating out of control. There have been, and there are still, ongoing significant deliberations around nuclear disarmament, cluster munitions, as well as small arms and light weapons. We continue to persevere with the necessary measures, seeking to address immediate concerns that we cannot ignore.

However, Bishop Fabiny's words in the opening line serve as a timely reminder that we—as religious leaders and communities—must intervene at an earlier stage when we discern that violence is already hovering around the provocative words being spoken, especially in the public space.

Today, in the wild world of social media and fear-based journalism, where a headline only “leads if it bleeds”, public discourse calling for social exclusion has dire consequences. Religious leaders can and should make use of social media platforms and the broader public space to interrupt hate speech and inject alternative narratives that can bring healing. They have a responsibility to speak to their immediate audiences, the believers, to halt the escalation in tone and intensity of violence. Because history tells us: where discourse and narratives are divisive, exclusivist, and aggressive, actual violence against people, particularly minorities, is just around the corner.

We have learned through the decade of overcoming violence against women that there are stages leading to severe domestic abuse. Even before physical violence occurs, verbal and non-verbal expressions of intimidation, coercion, isolation and threats are signs indicating a harmful trajectory where victims will get hurt. That is why, before we talk about saying ‘yes’ to forgiveness and reconciliation (which is core to longer term transformation), we must first say an uncompromising ‘NO!’ to hate speech—and any form of incitement to hatred against the most vulnerable among us. Words matter! Faith communities have a duty and a responsibility to counter these tendencies early, before any situation of controversy or conflict escalates into full-blown armed conflict.

As we remember the tragedy of the holocaust and also the deeply personal struggle of women across the world, we recognize that disarming hearts and hands works together with strengthening legal instruments and political will as part of

¹ Tamás Fabiny, “Asking Forgiveness for the Deportation of Hungary’s Holocaust Victims,” The Lutheran World Federation, September 6, 2019, <https://www.lutheranworld.org/blog/asking-forgiveness-deportation-hungarys-holocaust-victims> (accessed 6 February 2020).

the larger agenda of disarmament. It is still an uphill task. To some observers, even some faith communities, many may feel disempowered to do anything at all, especially when they do not possess the political power or legal expertise in the face of such a monumental problem. On the other hand, they may feel that only the voice of a heroic, iconic faith leader can have any effect.

Nevertheless, we must realize that we—collectively—have spiritual and practical resources within our communities that can make a difference. No matter how impossible the task ahead of us may seem. We need to collaborate, not only ecumenically within our religious traditions; we must reach out and collaborate across religious traditions, to show solidarity in the midst of growing tensions in our societies.

Of course, we acknowledge that talk is never enough. Surely public declarations devoid of concrete action and accompaniment with significant actors on the ground make our talk sound empty and shallow. Within the Lutheran Communion, the perseverance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Colombia (IELCO) has inspired us at the LWF. Over the past 50 years, more than 250,000 lives have been lost due to armed conflicts in the region. In 2016, the LWF offered continuing support to the IELCO when the government of Colombia signed a peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). FARC fighters “pledged to hand in their weapons” and join the political process of the nation, in return for support to reintegrate into civilian life.

However, the implementation of the November 2016 Peace agreement faced a roadblock recently on 29 August, when several former FARC members released a video “calling for a return to armed conflict and blaming the government for betraying the peace process”. Immediately, the IELCO intervened publicly urging the government of Colombia “to maintain an attitude of cooperation and open dialogue in order to achieve a complete peace”. At the same time, IELCO strongly called on the nation to reject “forms of violence and in particular the rearmament of the FARC combatants”—this call included an appeal to the combatants to “reconsider their call to arms, ... and instead to live out the peace that Jesus Christ proclaimed for the world.” The church remained committed to the peace process also through her on-the-ground accompanying of the ex-combatants who have “opted to reject violence and pursue their goals through peaceful means”.²

The church continues to persevere in supporting ex-combatants as they seek to reintegrate into civilian life. The story in Colombia is not over yet. Here we want to highlight a faith community undeterred by this setback and offering significant intervention, in spite of the attempts to plunge the nation into a spiral of violent armed conflict again.

Next, (without ignoring the drive of the powerful to control using violent means,) I would like to draw your attention to the condition of “fear” that is one of the ingredients used to exclude the ‘Other’ who’s different from us. This is particularly

² “Colombian Church Leaders Urge Former Combatants to ‘Follow Path of Peace.’” The Lutheran World Federation, September 4, 2019, <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/colombian-church-leaders-urge-former-combatants-follow-path-peace>; see also Megan Janetsky, “How to Keep the Colombian Peace Deal Alive,” *Foreign Policy*, September 8, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/08/how-to-keep-the-colombian-peace-deal-alive-farc-duque-uribe-colombia/>.

visible in majority and minority religious contexts, but increasingly irresponsible actors or political opportunists publicly use hate speech to fuel phobias (irrational fears) against fellow residents and citizens of a country.

How can faith communities speak to those fears? Religious leaders are challenged in our complex world to go beyond decorative speeches of ‘peace and harmony’ that may camouflage the deeper, invisible frustrations of affected communities. It takes a delicate balance of reacting to immediate challenges with counter measures, and at the same time attending to longer-term engagement in the public space for the common good.

In the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks, which targeted Christian places of worship and hotels in Sri Lanka, the LWF, through its President, Nigerian Archbishop Dr Panti Filibus Musa and myself, called upon religious leaders, including Christians, to:

- address and publicly oppose hate speech and justification for any form of discrimination, violence and extremism.
- continue engaging in the public space with the goal of seeking the common good and promoting equal protection and participation of all people.³

The LWF statement reminds Christians that Easter is a season where “violence and hatred won’t have the last word.” More generally, I would like to also say that we must not allow “violence and hatred” to be the first word either. As religious leaders committed to non-violence, following the important reminder of Bishop Tamás Fabiny, we must detect and address provocations of ‘social exclusion’ early, before another tragedy comes around the corner.

Inspired by our brothers and sisters in Colombia’s effort in their peace process, while engaging in the public space for the common good, we persevere with the spiritual resources within and across our religious traditions to address underlying fears that affect the coexistence of different ethnic and religious communities too.

The road ahead to disarmament is still long and winding. The path to nurturing a culture of non-violence will be plagued with roadblocks or setbacks. However, as faith communities, we must not be known as communities of fear.

The defining feature of faith communities is ‘faith’ and not ‘fear’—and surely not as a people who promote any form of phobia that dehumanizes the ‘Other’, our fellow citizens and neighbors. The LWF is committed to supporting and nurturing the collaboration of communities of faith that will model hospitality and hope to overcome fear. We can do no other, because precious lives matter.

Martin Junge, “Disarm the Hearts and Hands: Words matter! Overcoming Fear with Faith”, Speech delivered at the Sant’Egidio International Prayer Meeting for Peace, Madrid, Spain, 15-17 September 2019.

³ “Sri Lanka: LWF Condemns Violence, Urges Religious Leaders to Promote Peace,” The Lutheran World Federation, April 24, 2019, <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/sri-lanka-lwf-condemns-violence-urges-religious-leaders-promote-peace>.

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* See LWF Archives <https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/archives>

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