Thinking Theologically about Religious Others: Christian Theologies of Religions

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> We explain the fact that the Milky Way is there by the doctrine of
> creation, but how do we explain the fact that the Bhagavad Gita is there?[1]

Wilfred Cantwell Smith's question crystallizes a central concern of the Christian theology of religions. It is a question of origins: How do we as Christians account theologically for the existence of religions other than Christianity? If God is one, why are there so many religions?[2]

However, Christian theologies of religions rarely if ever stop at this etiological problem. They also wrestle with two other questions (or, more accurately, two constellations of questions). First, what is the relation of other religions to the Christian "thing"? Commonly—though by no means exclusively—this question is framed in *soteriological* terms: Are religious others[3] in any sense "saved"? Does the fact that they do not believe in Christ place them beyond the scope of his saving work? The question of relations can also be framed in terms of *validity*: Does the fact that other religions differ in important respects from Christianity make them invalid? Does difference amount to idolatry, pure and simple? Or is it more complicated than that? Is it possible that the God to whom Christians witness is active in and through other religions, and if so, how?

Second, what implications (if any) do the beliefs and practices of religious others have for Christian theology? Are they irrelevant to Christian theology simply because they are not Christian? Or can Christian theologians learn from them, and if so, what is the relation of such beliefs and practices to the sources and norms of Christian theology?[4]

Pulling together these different strands of inquiry, we can formulate the following provisional definition of the Christian theology of religions: it is *Christian theological reflection about the existence and significance of religious others, and about their relation to Christianity and that which it proclaims (e.g., salvation, knowledge of God).*

Despite this broad commonality of subject matter, there is no single, universally accepted Christian theology of religions. Quite the contrary: Christians have developed

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many different approaches to theological reflection about religious others. Furthermore, as in other areas of Christian theology, the theology of religions has undergone significant development over the last two thousand years. The following sections of this chapter examine the diversity and development of the Christian theology of religions. The first section looks at the Christian theology of religions diachronically, tracing its history and development.…We conclude with suggestions for future development in the theology of religions.

Continuity and Change: The History and Development of Christian Attitudes toward the Religious Other[5]

The story of Christian theological reflection about religious others can be broken into three parts, which together inscribe a broad circle, from diversity to monopoly and back to diversity. In its early days, Christianity was one religious community among many, jostling for space in a diverse religious environment. Christians differed about its relationship to other religious traditions and about the soteriological status of religious others. This changed during the second period, that of Western Christendom, when Christianity was the official religion first of the Roman imperial state and then of the medieval European states. Christian theologians displayed little concern with religious others, and the few comments about them were largely negative. Then, beginning with the "discoveries" of the navigators sailing under the flags of Portugal and Spain, Christianity once again found itself as one religion among many. This third period is marked by increasing awareness of religious diversity around the globe and, more recently, within Western societies themselves. In struggling to cope with this situation, Christian theologians, as they did in the early period, have adopted various approaches. Let us examine these three periods in greater detail.

The Early Period (to ca. 400 C.E.)

Due to the particular circumstances in which Christianity had its origins, its adherents have been thinking theologically about other religions from the beginning. Much as Buddhism and Jainism arose within the Indian religious context commonly called Hinduism, Christianity began as a messianic reform movement within the Judaism(s) of Palestine in the first century C.E. Since the new movement did not succeed in replacing other forms of Judaism, Christians had to come to terms with the fact that many of their former co-religionists did not convert to Christianity. As the New Testament texts indicate, Christians early on recognized a need to establish their own identity in relation to the continuing Jewish traditions and communities. Complicating this process of identity-formation was the fact that Christians and Jews shared not only a body of texts—the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament—but also basic notions about God, an emphasis on salvation, a concern for the poor and the outsider, a Wisdom tradition, and belief in the fundamental goodness of the divinely created cosmos.

Given the fact that Christianity asserted both its distinctiveness *from* Judaism and its shared heritage *with* Judaism, Christian thought about Judaism—and, as we will see, other religious traditions as well—was from the beginning characterized by what Lucien

Legrand terms the two axes of continuity and discontinuity.[6] These two axes reflected the affirmations Christians made about Jesus Christ himself. On the one hand, Christians held that Christ is the culmination of the whole salvation history from Adam's fall through the election of the people of Israel (e.g., Jesus says that he comes not to abolish but to fulfill the Law and the prophets (Mt 5:17-18)). On the other hand, Christians held that in the Christ-event God has done something unique and decisive. Christ is the new Adam (1 Cor 15:40-50); he is the mediator of a new covenant between God and humanity (Heb 8:6-13).

The tensions between continuity and discontinuity raised a number of questions about Christians' relationship to Judaism, questions that form the foundation of the Christian theology of religions. In what respects does the Christian message preserve and carry on the preceding (and continuing) Jewish tradition? And in what respects does the Gospel represent a break with that tradition? Given the new circumstances of the coming of God in Jesus Christ, what are Christians to make of God's historical promises to Israel? Are Jews still the "chosen people," in light of their non-acceptance of the Christian message? Given the fact that Christians share a body of sacred scripture with the Jews, what accounts for the significant difference between Christian and Jewish interpretations of those texts?

There also arose a number of soteriological questions. If Christ is the one and only savior, what was the soteriological status of those Jews who lived and died before "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (Jn 1:14), such as Moses, David, and the prophets? Did Christ's salvific work operate retroactively, and if so, how, and under what conditions? If not, how can God be called just and loving?

Similar questions characterized Christian thought about religions other than Judaism, the so-called "pagan" religions of the Gentiles. Although the Gentiles seem to have been no more than a marginal concern of Jesus himself (see the readings under "New Testament Texts," below), they grew increasingly important as Christianity spread beyond Palestine and eventually became a predominantly Gentile community. In this broader context, Christianity found itself as one religion among many. Besides the Roman imperial cult and the mystery religions (such as the cults of Isis/Osiris and Mithras), Christianity ran up against the various philosophical schools, which concerned themselves with questions we would today associate with "religion": the nature of ultimate reality, the nature and destiny of the human soul, how one lives a virtuous life, how one distinguishes good from evil, and so forth. As was the case with Judaism, Christianity had to formulate its own identity over against these other religious (or religio-philosophical) traditions.

Once again, Christian thought was concerned with the two axes of continuity and discontinuity. Is the Christian message an utterly "new thing" for the Greeks? Or is there some continuity between the Gospel and the venerable tradition of Greek thought and religiosity? Paul's speech in Athens (see readings below) manifests both tendencies. The axis of discontinuity appears in his clear opposition to what he considers the idolatry of the Greeks, and in his declaration that God "commands all people everywhere to repent." However, Paul also quotes from pre-Christian Greek writers—that is, "pagan" testimony—in support of his Christian message. In doing so, he appeals to a kind of divine witness already present among the Greeks—in other words, to an underlying

continuity between the Christian message and the Greek tradition (or at least aspects thereof).

From the second century on, these two approaches characterized Christian theological reflection about the "pagan" religions. While insisting on the distinctiveness of the Gospel, Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria stressed the Gospel's continuity with whatever is good and true in the Greek religio-philosophical tradition. Tertullian and Cyprian, on the other hand, stressed discontinuity, holding that only Christian teaching is salvific, or, in a phrase that would be associated with Cyprian, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("There is no salvation outside the church").

The soteriological questions that were raised in regards to Judaism also arose in theological reflection about the "pagans." If Christ is the one and only savior, what was the soteriological status of those Gentiles who lived and died before the incarnation, particularly such worthies as Socrates and Pythagoras? Did Christ's salvific work operate retroactively, and if so, how, and under what conditions? If such admirable persons were excluded from salvation, how can God be called just and loving?

Christendom (400s to ca. 1500)

After centuries of intermittent but at times devastating persecution, Christianity suddenly "made it." It was adopted by the emperor Constantine, and within a generation, it was established as the official religion—and as the only officially *tolerated* religion—of the Roman Empire.

As Joseph Kitagawa notes, this new relationship between church and state was a quid pro quo arrangement. For his part, Constantine "envisaged a new religious-cultural-social-political synthesis," under his own supreme authority, "which was to be given its cosmic legitimation by Christianity." For its part, "The Christian community . . . eager to be on the main stage in the empire, coveted the opportunity to serve Constantine, even though it had to be subservient to his will." As a result of this new alliance, Christianity "began to be reshaped, patterning itself after the prototype of the *imperium*."[7]

Under this new "religious-cultural-social-political synthesis"—which I will call the "Christendom synthesis"—allegiance to the church came to be conflated with allegiance to the imperial state. Christianity was threatened when the state was threatened. And vice versa: disloyalty to the church came to be seen as treason to the state. Heretics and non-Christians were not simply a theological problem: they were seen to threaten the religious-political order, the Christendom synthesis, itself.

After 380, when the emperor Theodosius I established Christianity as the official religion of the Roman imperial state, non-Christians began to suffer persecution as intense and sustained as that which Christians had endured before Constantine. Theodosius "promulgated harsh anti-pagan laws and ordered the destruction of the huge, world-famous Serapis temple in Alexandria."[8] Presaging the Nazis's book-burning spectacles two millennia later, Christian officials organized the destruction of non-Christian writings "in great bonfires at the center of the town square," and discouraged copyists "from replacing them by the threat of having their hands cut off."[9] The very instruments of coercive state power which had been used to punish Christians were now used by Christian authorities against non-Christians and those Christians who deviated from orthodoxy.

The Christendom synthesis inevitably affected Christian theology. Augustine, bishop of the North African city of Hippo, employed the parable of the banquet (Lk 14:22-23) to justify the use of state force against those who deviated from what he perceived as orthodoxy. Thomas Aquinas later used Augustine's argument to support forcibly compelling heretics (though not Jews or other non-Christians) to return to the official Catholic faith.

Beginning in the fifth century, various Germanic peoples, some non-Christian, overran the Western empire in successive waves. By 1000, however, most of Europe had been (at least nominally) Christianized, and the Christendom synthesis re-emerged.…

Theologically, this was a period of great confidence in the rightness of the Western European Christian perspective and institutions. Until the late fifteenth century, there was a general belief that the Gospel message had reached all parts of the world; those who were not Christian had willingly rejected the Gospel message and were thus justifiably outside the realm of salvation. Accordingly, in 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council gave the doctrine *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* a new, extreme form: "There is one Universal Church of the faithful, outside of which there is *absolutely* no salvation."[10]

Due in part to this ecclesiocentric orientation, but also to Western European ignorance about the rest of the world, this period saw few works of systematic theological reflection about religious others.…

One of the few works from this period devoted to the consideration of religious others is Nicholas of Cusa's *De Pace Fidei* ("The Peace of God," excerpted below). Nicholas meditates on the problem of interreligious violence (he has in mind the recent Muslim conquest of Byzantium), and envisions an irenic solution. True to the time, the supreme confidence of Christendom resurfaces in the fact that the solution Nicholas imagines is a single religion with Christ as the center, recognized as the true God by the representatives of Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism.

Modernity and After (since ca. 1500)

In the late 1400s, the European "discovery" of the rest of the world (the Americas, sub-Saharan Africa, east Asia, and the Pacific) gradually stirred Christian thinkers from their theological slumber regarding religious others. They awoke to two disconcerting realizations. First, not only were most of the world's inhabitants non-Christians, but, contrary to the governing assumption of the medieval period, most had never encountered the Gospel. Second, alongside Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, there existed venerable and highly sophisticated religious systems, which envisioned the Ultimate, the cosmos, and humanity in ways that were both radically different from Christianity and surprisingly similar. For the first time since the beginnings of Christendom, Western Christians became conscious of themselves as one religious community among many. We are still dealing today with the issues raised by these realizations of the early Modern period.…

For much of the modern period, the dominant Christian theological approach to religious others asserted the supremacy of Christianity and the necessity of the church (the Catholic view) or explicit faith in Christ (the principal Protestant view) to salvation. With some notable exceptions (discussed below), religious difference was regarded as a sign of deficiency at best, of idolatry at worst. Yet European theologians often made such

claims without substantial, direct knowledge of the religious traditions they were condemning.[11]

Nevertheless, the "discovery" of vast numbers of religious others raised difficult soteriological questions that had largely been on the back burner during the Christendom period. If Christ was the one and only savior, what was the soteriological status of the innumerable peoples in the newly discovered lands who lived and died without ever hearing the Gospel? Given the fact that they never (explicitly) believed in Christ or were baptized, did Christ's salvific work also apply to them? If so, how were they saved, and under what conditions; and what does the answer say about the status of the Church and its sacraments? On the other hand, if Christ's salvific work did *not* apply to these non-Christian peoples, how can God be called just and loving?

In light of these troubling questions (as the editors of *Ministry and Theology in Global Perspective* write), "A growing number of Christians, especially Roman Catholics, judged it no longer appropriate to try to maintain the rhetoric of the traditional doctrine of no salvation outside the church in view of the overwhelming number of innocent persons, past and present, involved."[12] The theological problem lay in reconciling belief in the centrality and necessity of the church, with the belief that a just and loving God would not condemn those who had not encountered the Gospel. For Roman Catholic thinkers, Thomas Aquinas's notion of baptism by desire offered one way to reconcile these two notions: "If pagans could not be baptized with water (*in re*), they could 'through desire' (*in voto*). If they followed their conscience and lived morally, they were implicitly expressing a desire to join the church and could thus get through the doorway of salvation."[13] Another reconciliation for Catholic thinkers involved the *inculpability* of non-Christians: "If a [non-Christian] person were truly open to the mysterious inward workings of divine grace within the interiority of his or her own soul, such a person might be *oriented toward* the church even if he or she had never heard of it and thus, from God's perspective, inculpable."[14]…This relatively charitable perspective opened the way for the work of Karl Rahner in the twentieth century.

For many Protestants, however, such solutions were not available, since they seemed to run counter to Protestantism's strong assertion of the radical discontinuity between Christianity and other religions, of the need for explicit faith in Christ, and of the centrality of the Bible over reason and tradition. Consequently, for much of this period, Protestant discourse about religious others was largely negative. Rather than allowing for the possibility of divine presence among non-Christians, Protestants (especially in the nineteenth century) tended to stress the need for conversionary mission.

Ironically, a more open and nuanced attitude toward religious others came from some of the very Christians, Catholic and Protestant alike, who were sent to convert them, and who thereby gained first-hand knowledge of their perspective, beliefs, and practices. For example, the Dominican priest Bartholomé de las Casas (1484-1566), the first bishop of the southern Mexican region of Chiapas, developed a deep respect for the indigenous peoples of the Americas. He argued that they not only were nobler and more rational than the ancient Greeks, but also held a superior notion of God. Appalled by the gross mistreatment of the Indians at the hands of their "Christian" conquerors and overlords, Las Casas even envisioned a Day of Judgment in which Christians, because of their oppression of the Indians and because of the latter's own good works, will be outnumbered by unbelievers at the right hand of God.

Equally important was the contribution of Jesuit missionaries to Asia, most notably Robert de Nobili (1577-1656) and Matteo Ricci (1552-1610). Much as Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria had found much to admire (and to claim as proto-Christian) in the Greek philosophical tradition, so de Nobili developed deep respect for Hinduism, as did Ricci for Confucianism. These missionaries, as J. J. Clarke writes, "sent back to Europe detailed and sympathetic accounts of the beliefs and practices of the people they sought to convert," and produced some of the first translations of the Asian religious classics in Latin.[15] In many cases, this was the first time the texts of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism were available in the West, and they had a significant effect on Western thought.…

As Clarke suggests, the European encounter with religious others coincided with the beginnings of modernity, a true sea change in Western culture. Wearied by decades of intra-Christian violence, and buoyed by recent advances in science and technology, prophets of modernity such as Voltaire, Kant, and Hegel promoted faith in human reason as the basis of knowledge, rather than revelation or religious authority. Modernity also saw the rise of democratic thought, a new emphasis on the individual, advocacy of individual human rights, and the rise of free-market capitalism and the middle class. In the dominant cultural circles in the West, a new, secular confidence in human progress along European lines replaced the religious confidence of Christendom.…

Another result of the European encounter with religious others was the rise of the discourse of "comparative religion" or "history of religions." This new discipline, which arose in part from the translations and reports of the missionaries, grew apace in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and rapidly branched into numerous approaches (including anthropological, sociological, phenomenological, and philosophical). Working with the sacred texts of other religions (as well as reports from the new disciplines of ethnography and anthropology), Western scholars such as Max Müller, William James, Rudolf Otto, and Emile Durkheim detected fundamental similarities between what came to be called the "world religions." This essentially modern (and essentially European) category was usually thought to include Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and sometimes Zoroastrianism. The world religions were held to differ from "primitive" religions by having certain characteristics in common. These included a set of moral teachings (often remarkably similar from one "world religion" to the next), a corpus of sacred texts, a movement from polytheism to ethical monotheism, a sense of the holy or sacred, some sense of transcendence and immanence, and a criticism of crude idolatry.

In this period, there also surfaced the notion that understanding one's own religious tradition entails learning about other religious traditions. For instance, Paul Carus, in his *Buddhism and its Christian Critics* (1897), "expressed the belief that 'Mankind does not want Buddhism, nor Islam, nor Christianity; mankind wants the truth, and the truth is best brought out by an impartial comparison', and urged that 'every religious man should study other religions in order to understand his own.'"[16] This insight would later resurface as a key argument in support of comparative theology (discussed below).

By the early nineteenth century, as Western scholars grew more knowledgeable about the sophistication and complexity of other religions, as well as the common ground between Christianity and religious others, it became more difficult for Christian

theologians to make unqualified assertions about their inferiority, or to insist that they were totally without truth or the presence of the divine. This had a dramatic impact on Christian theological reflection. Indeed, the German Protestant theologian and philosopher of history Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) noted in 1897 that "the rise of a comparative history of religion has shaken the Christian more deeply than anything else."[17]

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this disturbance was particularly evident in the Protestant community. A common strategy in this period was to define religion in a particular way (usually drawing on features of Christianity) and then show how Christianity represents its ultimate or most complete manifestation: that is, as Troeltsch puts it, to argue that Christianity "is not a *particular* religion, it is *religion*."[18] For Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), the essence of religion lies in a universal "feeling of absolute dependence" that Christianity alone (and Protestantism in particular) expresses fully. It should be noted, however, that Schleiermacher derives this universal experience not from data from the religions themselves, but from his own Pietist Christian background.[19] By contrast, one of Schleiermacher's successors, Rudolf Otto (1869-1937), looked both within Christianity and in other religions (predominantly Hinduism) for a common essence. In his *The Idea of the Holy* (*Das Heilige*, 1917), Otto argues that what characterizes all religion is the essentially non-rational experience of the numinous, the "Wholly Other," which he called the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the awe-inspiring and enthralling mystery. Yet while Otto finds common ground between Christianity and other religions, he, like Schleiermacher, also asserts the superiority of the former.[20]

In the mid-twentieth century, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) gave this approach a novel twist by first setting up a dichotomy between divinely originated "revelation" and human-originated "religion" (which he equated with "unbelief"), and then arguing that Christianity is the only religion that, thanks to divine revelation, recognizes its own character as unbelief, and can therefore be considered the true religion. Like Schleiermacher, however, Barth decides on Christianity's supremacy *a priori*, not as a result of first-hand investigation into the actual beliefs and practices of religious others.[21]

While sharing with Schleiermacher the modern metanarrative of human progress with Christianity at the apex, the Anglican theologian Frederick Denison Maurice (1805-1872) developed a more nuanced and positive view of religious others. Echoing John's Gospel, Maurice stressed that the kingdom of Christ is not simply a future hope, but has always been vitally present, and continues to be so today. This had important implications for his view of religious others. Since for Maurice, "There was not and could not have been any place or time when Christ was not present," he must have been present in non-Christian religions as well, making them a preparation for the gospel.[22] The religions of the world were not mere human inventions, but were "integral to the working out of God's purposes in the world."[23] Maurice even anticipated the notion of some contemporary theologians of religions that dialogue with other religions can serve as a corrective to Christianity's own errors—allowing, for example, the rediscovery of doctrines which Christians "might have forgotten, understated or distorted."[24]

Other Christian theologians—particularly those who endeavored to study other religions in depth—found the task of establishing the unqualified supremacy of their own

religion far more difficult. Case in point is Ernst Troeltsch, who dedicated much of his theological career to this task. In his 1902 work, *The Absolute Validity of Christianity*, he argued that Christianity's understanding of revelation made it independent of any particular culture and thus uniquely universal. Nonetheless, his growing knowledge of the historical development of Christianity and other religions made him increasingly aware of fundamental problems with such an argument....

Near the end of his life, Troeltsch wrote that Christians must rethink the missionary project, foreshadowing the contemporary emphasis on interreligious dialogue:

> in relation to the great world religions [Christians] need to recognize that they are expressions of the religious consciousness corresponding to certain definite types of culture, and that it is their duty to increase in depth and purity by means of their own interior impulses, a task in which the contact with Christianity may prove helpful, to them as to us, in such processes of development from within.…There can be no conversion or transformation of one into the other, but only a measure of agreement and of mutual understanding.[25]

As Troeltsch's comments indicate, there was a growing realization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of the need for dialogue between religions. An early sign of this move toward dialogue was the World's Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893, which offered many North Americans their first opportunity to encounter Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims. However, the interfaith dialogue movement began in earnest in the period after World War II. The new interest in dialogue was triggered in part by the horror of the Nazis' attempt to obliterate the Jews of Europe, as well as by increasing interreligious violence in formerly colonized countries in the Middle East and on the Indian subcontinent. Religious leaders increasingly realized that mutual tolerance and understanding were required if people were to combat not only interreligious violence, but also a host of other social, political, economic, and ecological problems.[26]

By the 1960s, this realization had reached the highest levels of mainline denominational leadership. A milestone was the Vatican's 1965 "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," known as *Nostra Aetate*.[27] This document recognizes an authentic sense of the Divine in the religions of "various peoples." Referring specifically to Hinduism and Buddhism, the declaration states: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men." Finally, the declaration exhorts Catholics to engage in "dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life," so as to "recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men [i.e., non-Christians]."[28] While the main Protestant and Orthodox ecumenical body, the World Council of Churches, was slower to formulate a clear statement on the need for interreligious dialogue, it has recently moved decisively in that direction.[29]

Another shift in contemporary theological thinking has been triggered by (or at least is associated with) recent developments in thought—including postmodernism, postcolonialism, poststructuralism—which, for lack of a better term, I will call the "post-isms."…

Before we turn to the impact of "post-ist" perspectives on contemporary Christian theology of religions, it should be noted that some contemporary Christian discourse about religious others proceed more or less as if postmodernity—or, for that matter, many of the developments of the modern period—had never happened. However, such instances of Christian thought often demonstrate little or no familiarity with the actual beliefs and practices of religious others. They argue primarily from *a priori* claims about Christianity and religious others (often stressing the particularistic strain of the biblical witness to the exclusion of the universalistic strain).

That said, the insights of "post-ist" thought have decisively influenced many other contemporary Christian thinkers, particularly those involved in theological reflection about religious others.…

One mark of this post-ist consciousness is a concern for otherness and difference generally. Since the 1960s, liberation-oriented Christian theologians have drawn attention to those whose voices have been suppressed in traditional Christian discourse—including women, people of color, gay and lesbian persons, the poor, and the oppressed—and the ways in which this exclusion has tainted Christian thought and practice.

More recently, this concern for the marginalized has been extended to religious others. Paul Knitter, for example, highlights the essential link between religious marginalization and social-political-economic marginalization when he holds that "concern for the suffering Other" cannot be separated from "dialogue with the religious Other."[30]…

The post-ist stress on the inevitable situatedness of experience and thought pervades much recent theological reflection about religious others. Carrying on the insights of Troeltsch, John Hick stresses the influence of culture on religion. Rather than viewing difference as a mark of error, Hick interprets it as a natural result of the situatedness of all religious experience. George A. Lindbeck pushes this notion even farther. Reflecting the general post-ist stress on language and discourse, Lindbeck contends that religions are language-like entities that determine the experiences and beliefs of adherents.…Indeed, Lindbeck argues, just as it makes no sense to say that Japanese is a "better" or "truer" language than French, so it makes equally no sense to compare religions, to claim that Christian teaching is superior to Buddhist teaching: they are simply—and radically—different. More recently, S. Mark Heim has extended the notion of radical difference into the realm of soteriology. He argues that there are many religions because there are many "religious ends": "religious paths in fact lead persons to the distinctively varied states they advertise and on which they set such transcendent value."[31] As Knitter describes Heim's stance, "Buddhists arrive at Nirvana, Christians arrive at union with God. And both are happy."[32]

Another mark of the increasing concern for difference is the development of comparative theology, including the work of theologians such as James L. Fredericks, Francis X. Clooney, and John P. Keenan.[33] Reflecting the post-ist distrust of *a priori* universals and grand narratives, comparative theology (as Fredericks writes) "does not start with a grand theory of religion in general that claims to account for all religions,"

nor does it "look for some abstract lowest common denominator or essence that all religions, including Christianity, share."[34] Indeed, comparative theology holds that a complete and satisfactory theology of religions is not possible prior to in-depth dialogue with other religions. Instead, it is "a theology that arises *through* dialogue," "a Christian theology done by means of dialogue with those who follow other religious paths."[35] Indeed, comparative theology can be regarded as a move to move beyond the theology of religions paradigm altogether, to bring dialogue with religious others to the center of Christian theological reflection.[36]

Among the more interesting recent developments in recent theology of religions are contributions from Christians working in the formerly colonized world, in contexts that are (or have until recently been) predominantly non-Christian or that have large and flourishing non-Christian communities. For Christians in Asia and Africa, interreligious dialogue is not a theological option, but a fact of life, one to be welcomed.

…

As early theologians such as Justin Martyr contextualized Christian teaching to the Greek religio-philosophical tradition, so present-day Christians in Asia, Africa, and the Pacific are developing ways in which the message of Christ can both find expression in, and be illuminated by, contexts shaped by Asian religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. This process is sometimes referred to as *inculturation*, which Pope John Paul II described as "the incarnation of the Gospel in native cultures and also the introduction of these cultures into the life of the Church."[37] Inculturation is not, strictly speaking, a species of the theology of religions. However, given the close relationship between religion and culture, the actual praxis of inculturating the Gospel frequently assumes and/or implies a theological stance regarding the value of non-Christian religions to the Christian message, and often results, not merely in a "translation" of the Christian message, but also in the incorporation of non-Christian insights into Christian theology.

Take, for instance, two South Korean Protestants, Jung Young Lee and Heup Young Kim.[38] Both theologians unashamedly "own up to" (the phrase is Kim's) not only their Christian faith, but also the fact that Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Shamanism have decisively shaped Korean culture. As Kim writes, these religious traditions "are important parts of our own identity, functioning as native religious languages or spiritual DNA."[39] Lee draws on the yin/yang tradition to develop a theology of the Trinity, while Kim draws on the concept of the Dao ("Way") to retrieve ancient Christian insights about God and the world, insights that have been suppressed by Western dualistic thinking. Similar developments can be found in the work of Christian theologians in dialogue with the religions of the Indian subcontinent, such as Wesley Ariarajah, Lynn de Silva, M. Thomas Thangaraj, Raimundo Panikkar, and Michael Amaladoss.[40] Examples of the inculturation process can be seen in the readings from Chung Hyun Kyung, Engelbert Mveng, and Aloysius Pieris in the section "Modern and Postmodern Voices."

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Where next? Christian theological reflection about religious others, like Christian theology generally, is a very dynamic field. Much exciting and significant work is being

done today, making important contributions not only to relations with religious others but also to Christian self-understanding. Yet much remains to be done. In closing this survey of the theology of religions, I offer not so much a summary of trends as a *provocation*: a challenge to continue the development of Christian theological reflection about religious others. Some of these points are already being addressed by theologians working on the cutting edge of the field; others have yet to be addressed to the extent they deserve.

First, it is important that to recognize that the diversity of perspectives within the Christian community itself cannot be separated from the encounter with religious others. In some ways, Christians have always had religious others in our midst—other Christians whom we have, for whatever reasons, anathematized, excommunicated, dis-fellowshipped, or otherwise excluded. Ironically, Christians sometimes find that they have more in common with members of other religions than they do with other Christians; this insight is ripe with theological implications that should be teased out and explored.

Second, the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging—whereby persons identify themselves as adherents of more than one religious tradition—deserves additional theological investigation. The Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) have traditionally insisted on an either/or relationship between religions—that is, by becoming, say, a Christian one must give up allegiance to all other religious traditions.[41] In other parts of the world, however, this exclusivism does not obtain. For example, many Chinese people are simultaneously Buddhist, Confucianist, and Daoist; many Japanese persons are simultaneously Buddhist and Shinto; and as an old saying goes, Haitians are "80 percent Catholic, 20 percent Protestant, and 100 percent Vodoun." In recent years, this phenomenon has become increasingly common in Western societies, as Christians explore Buddhist practice, Hindu teachings, and so on.[42]

The phenomenon of multiple belonging raises intriguing issues of religious boundary-drawing: Where does "the Christian" stop and "the non-Christian" begin? Is there intersection at those boundaries, or are the traditions mutually exclusive? What relevance do the experiences of Christians in non-Christian practices (such as Zen meditation) have for Christian theological reflection?

Third[43]—and related to the problem of boundary-drawing—it is crucial to examine the ways in which Christianity *discursively constructs* religious others, and the theological implications of that process.[44] Through various discursive practices, Christians mark off the boundaries of the Christian "thing," and in so doing, also mark off, explicitly or implicitly, the "not-Christian," religious others. There is no "Christianity" outside the discourse of those who call themselves "Christians"; correlatively, "non-Christians" only exist as such by means of the discursive practices of "Christians"—in other words, what Christians repress or exclude, explicitly or implicitly. In Christian theological discourse, this boundary-drawing process is evident in the theologian's selection of resources for reflection (such as the Bible, church tradition, experience, reason, the works of other theologians).

While such discursive boundary-drawing is a necessary part of theological reflection (theologians must begin somewhere, and Christian theological reflection naturally begins in and with what is recognizably Christian), it is vital for Christian theologians to undertake this process with full awareness of what voices are being excluded and why. There are two reasons for this. First, if religious others are simply

projections or straw men, this undermines the truth value of the resulting theology, and calls into question Christian self-understanding. Second, while boundaries delimit certain kinds of truth (the truth revealed in God's incarnation in Christ, as witnessed by the Christian community), they limit or block access to other possible truths outside the Christian community.

Accordingly, Christian theology must recognize that its boundaries are provisional, not fixed and impermeable, and by no means essential, immutable, or worse, divinely appointed. They serve only to mark out a starting point, a field in which to begin Christian theology. As that theology proceeds, it must recognize its limits, and be ready at all times to hear and respond to the truth that lies beyond. That is, Christian theology needs to have a more fluid sense of "inside" and "outside," in order, as Fredericks puts it, to maintain a creative tension between Christian and non-Christian.[45] To do so, Christian theology must be ever mindful of two key questions: What is God saying and doing in and through religious others? What do religious others tell us Christians about ourselves, our witness, the God to whom we witness, and our relationship with that God, with human others, and with other beings? We cannot answer these questions if we do not first listen to religious others—and not just in Christian terms, but also in terms of how religious others think and experience the Divine/Ultimate.[46]

Notes

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[1] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Wilfred Cantwell Smith: A Reader*, ed. Kenneth Cracknell (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2001), 209. The *Bhagavad Gita* is one of the most beloved of the sacred texts of the Hindu religious tradition.

[2] This combines two questions posed by Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 1.

[3] By this term I mean those persons and communities judged by Christians to fall outside the boundaries of Christianity, however construed. Precisely who is included within this category varies from one theologian to the next.…

[4] In the interests of full disclosure, I should note that this has been the focus of much of my own work to date. See David R. Brockman, *Turning to Religious Others: Visions and Blindspots in Modern Christian Reflection about Non-Christians,* unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 2006, and Brockman, *No Longer the Same: Religious Others and the Liberation of Christian Theology* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[5] In the following remarks, I will focus on European Christianity, and from about the fifth century to the present day, the Western church—Roman Catholicism and the various Protestant groups that arose during and since the Reformation. However, the reader should note that there were other Christianities—the various Orthodox churches (Greek, Coptic, Russian, and others), as well as venerable Christian communities in Asia: the Nestorian community in China dates back to the seventh century, and the Mar Thoma Church in south India is even older. However, these communities lie outside the scope of this discussion.

[6] Lucien Legrand, cited in Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 50.

[7] Joseph Mitsuo Kitagawa, *The Christian Tradition: Beyond Its European Captivity* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 190-91.

[8] Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 2.

[9] Ibid., 4.

[10] The Canons of the Fourth Lateran Council. Emphasis mine. Online at http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lateran4.html. Accessed 28 May 2007.

[11] Schleiermacher's disparaging comments about "fetichism," Judaism, and Islam—which reveal more about his unfamiliarity with these religions than about the religions themselves—are emblematic of this problem (see Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Macintosh and J. S. Stewart [Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd., 1999], 37, 319). Similarly, Barth does not ground his theological category "religion" upon evidence from empirical study of the religions. He seems to have admitted as much in his oft-cited response to D. P. Niles: "Karl Barth was asked how he knew that Hinduism was a form of unbelief, given the fact that he had never met a Hindu. . . . Hinduism can be known to be unbelief, according to Barth, a priori" (James L. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), 21. The source is D. P. Niles, "Karl Barth—A Personal Memory," *South East Asian Journal of Theology* 11 [1969]: 10-11, cited in Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths*, 34n.15).

[12] Don A. Pittman, Ruben L.F. Habito, and Terry C. Muck, *Ministry and Theology in Global Perspective: Contemporary Challenges for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 50.

[13] Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 123.

[14] Pittmann et al., *Ministry and Theology in Global Perspective*, 51. The Jesuit Matteo Ricci (discussed below), when asked whether Confucius was in hell, answered: "All those who know God and love Him above all things, and who pass out of this life with such knowledge and love, are saved. If Confucius knew God and loved Him above all things, and passed out of this life with such knowledge and love, without doubt he is saved." Quoted in *Ministry and Theology in Global Perspective*.

[15] J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 40.

[16] Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 84.

[17] Quoted in Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 312.

[18] Ernst Troeltsch, *Christian Thought, Its History and Application*, trans. Mary E. Clarke (New York, NY: Meridian Books, 1957), 41.

[19] For my arguments in this regard, see Brockman, *Turning to Religious Others*, chap. 5.

[20] See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).…

[21] See Brockman, *Turning to Religious Others*, chap. 6.

[22] Kenneth Cracknell, *Justice, Courtesy and Love: Theologians and Missionaries Encountering World Religions, 1846-1914* (London: Epworth Press, 1995), 37-38.

[23] Ibid., 45.

[24] Ibid., 53.

[25] Troeltsch, "Christianity and the History of Religion," in *Christian Thought*, 58.

[26] An example of this argument is Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue & Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

[27] An English translation vetted by the Vatican is available online at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

[28] Ibid.

[29] For a discussion of the "twists and turns" of WCC policy development in this area, see Kenneth Cracknell, *In Good and Generous Faith: Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 180-227.…

[30] Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions*, 36. Aloysius Pieris similarly links interreligious encounter with a concern for the liberation of poor and suffering others. See his *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

[31] S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 19-20, 18. Heim gives three characteristics that define "religious end" in Heim, *The Depth of the Riches*, 21.

[32] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 193.

[33] Representative works of comparative theology include: Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001); James L. Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004); Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999); and John P. Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ: a Mahāyāna Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989). In the interests of full disclosure, I should note that much of my own public work to date has been in the area of Buddhist-Christian comparative theology. See David R. Brockman, "The Challenge of Yogācāra to David Tracy's Epistemology," *Koinonia* XV (2003): 1-22; and Brockman, "An All-Pervading Self: The Challenge of the Tathāgatagarbha Tradition to Christian Theological Anthropology," unpublished presentation to the Philosophy of Religion section, Southwest Regional meeting of the American Academy of Religion, March 2004.

[34] Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths*, 167-68.

[35] Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians*, 26.

[36] Although Knitter classifies comparative theology, along with postliberalism and Heim's "many religious ends" approach, under the "Acceptance" model (Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 173), Fredericks sees it as a move beyond the theology of religions paradigm (Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths*, 166-67). I make a similar argument in Brockman, *Turning to Religious Others*.

[37] John Paul II, *Slavorum Apostoli* (2 June 1985); available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_19850602_slavorum-apostoli_en.html; accessed 30 June 2008.

[38] Heup Young Kim, *Christ and the Tao* (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 2003); Jung Young Lee, *The Trinity in Asian Perspective* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

[39] Kim, *Christ and the Tao*, 126. "Any Christian identity disconnected from our own people, community, and collective identity is not only inappropriate but also false" (126). As Kim puts it, the religions of Korea "are rooted in my spirituality to constitute an essential part of my spiritual identity (something like a religio-cultural DNA), yet the Western Christianity I was taught superficially hangs about. Spiritually and religiously, Confucianism and Taoism (Neo-Confucianism) still function as my native languages, while the Western Christianity remains as a foreign language like English" (125).

[40] Representative works by these scholars include Wesley Ariarajah, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1985); Lynn A. De Silva, *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity* (New York: Barnes & Nobel, 1979); Raimundo Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness*, ed. Scott Eastham (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993); Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988); M. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru: An Experiment in Cross-cultural Christology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994).

[41] At least this has been the official position. The reality has often been quite different, as can be seen in the syncretistic blend of Christian and indigenous traditions in Latin American Catholicism.

[42] See the essays collected in Catherine Cornille, ed., *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

[43] The following remarks summarize a much more complex argument presented in Brockman, *Turning to Religious Others*, particularly chapters 4 and 9, and Brockman, *No Longer the Same*.

[44] By *discourse* I mean its sense as generally found in cultural studies: "the forms of representation, conventions and habits of language use producing specific fields of culturally and historically located meanings" (Peter Brooker, *A Concise Glossary of Cultural Theory* [New York, NY: Oxford University Press (Arnold), 1999], s.v. "Discourse," 66-67). I have removed the small capitals used to indicate that terms have their own entries elsewhere in this glossary.)…

[45] Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths*, 170-71.

[46] As I have argued in Brockman, *Turning to Religious Others*, 384-402, an important implication of this turn to the witness of religious others is a rethinking of the sources and norms used in Christian theological reflection: "The witness of religious others should not be relegated to a subordinate status. Rather, I envision something analogous to David Tracy's correlation of human experience and Christian witness, where both are brought into fully reciprocal, mutually critical conversation. In like fashion, the witness of religious others would be brought into fully reciprocal, mutually critical dialogue with Christian witness; in this way, *both* Christian witness *and* that of religious others would function as sources and norms for Christian theological reflection" (387).