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# TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF INTER-RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER

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*(The substance of this paper was delivered as part of a series of lectures on 'Comparative Religion and the Communication of the Gospel' at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, in February, 1969.)*

Some months ago I was talking to some research students in the United Theological College in Bangalore, India, and one of them (a German) asked me whether I thought that it was possible for one and the same person to be both a theologian and a close student of 'comparative religion', particularly within the framework of Evangelical commitment. He could see that a liberal (using that much-abused word in its widest sense) would find no difficulty in holding both positions simultaneously; but he was not so sure about the Evangelical—the term he used was post-Barthian, but his meaning was clear.

Perhaps without realising it, he had put his finger on one of the sorest spots in present-day Evangelical theology: the problem of how the Evangelical Christian is to interpret his fundamental faith in Christ in the context of other religions, other answers to those basic problems of human nature to which we claim that Christ has provided the all-sufficient answer. It would not be too much of an exaggeration to claim that the last truly magisterial work on this subject written by an Evangelical was Hendrik Kraemer's *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, and that book appeared over thirty years ago, in 1938.

My answer to the student's question, incidentally, was that I believed that such a combination of theology and sound study of world religions was entirely possible. To pass judgment on anything is always possible, provided that one nails one's colours to the mast and makes it entirely clear exactly what is the basis of one's judgment, and exactly what one's criteria are. It is perhaps unfortunate that in this case almost all scholars are, as one humorist put it, apt to nail their colours to the fence, conscientiously refusing to take sides or to say anything with which another scholar might conceivably disagree. The days of the great missionary scholars are now, it seems, past and gone; few missionaries have the time or the leisure to write the comprehensive studies that were so typical of former generations, not least in India. Of course, in the case of the Christian missionary, neutrality in these matters is neither desirable nor ultimately possible. If, in the sincerity of his desire to be all things to all men, he is prepared for the time being to suspend judgment, at least until he is able to feel firm ground beneath his feet, all well and good; but unwillingness to witness to the faith that is in him, in the mistaken belief that he is thereby forwarding some obscure process of dialogue, is not only mistaken: it smells of common dishonesty.

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But at the same time there are a good many Christians in the world today who are seriously and sincerely puzzled as to the attitude that they ought to adopt towards people confessing a faith other than their own. Once the problem was noticeable only when the Christian travelled to a non-Christian country; but today, the rapidity of communications which all take so much for granted, and the increasingly mobile character of the population of the world, are bringing all of us into contact with non-Christians—Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs and all the others—on a scale which would have been unthinkable only a couple of decades ago. The problem is a global one. And to the Christian who takes seriously that dimension of his faith which involves the proclamation of the Gospel to all men everywhere, it is a problem which simply cannot be solved merely by a precipitate retreat into obscurantism. There are cultural and racial factors involved, as well as religious factors; there is national and community pride, political aspiration, often a passionate rejection of what tends to be interpreted, rightly or wrongly, as a century of Western imperialism; the problem, in short, involves the whole of man in a vast multitude of separate human situations. We cannot go on pretending that it does not exist.

The need to evangelize the world has never been greater. The problems that face the evangelist have never been greater, either. The need for qualified guidance—and I stress the word 'qualified'—into the problems attending the communication of the Gospel to the non-Christian and post-Christian world has never been more pressing. But who is to provide that guidance? Who is to tell the Christian in the situation of encounter whether what he is saying makes sense? Who is to stop him charging blindly into a morass of misunderstanding when he attempts to proclaim the Gospel?

What is needed is, I believe, an entirely new effort on the part of Evangelicals to formulate a theology of encounter. Research students need to be directed more and more into this vital area of theological study. To be sure, all those thousands of dissertations produced each session on various aspects of Biblical studies and church history are valuable (or at least many of them are), at least for the student whose time has been spent preparing them; but for the Christian missionary effort as a whole, it would be far more valuable to have intensive work directed towards the area of encounter between the Gospel and the religions of the world. This is no easy option. Sound theology must be allied to close and detailed study of at least one, and preferably more, of the world religions, great and small. Such a student must be a man (or woman) of many parts: widely read, sensitive and experienced, committed and sympathetic. Here, too, the historian may play his part. You are perhaps not aware of those great treasure-stores of information which the missionary societies have hidden away in their basements: the mission archives, in which the experience of decades, and in some cases, centuries, has been gathered up and stored away, waiting for the right person to come and unlock them. It is impossible to stress too highly the service which enlightened historical research into the history of the Christian missionary enterprise can render the Church—not merely from the point of view of dispersing the mists

which have gathered around seminal figures of the past, but also from the point of view of helping to clear the ground for a correct estimate of the present situation. We can move ahead far more confidently if we can see where we have been.

While I am on the subject of research projects, it may be as well to put on record that we still do not have, as far as I am aware, the exhaustive study of the Biblical attitudes to other religions that we all so much need. Again it is a matter of the laying of solid foundations on which others may build.

I have spoken of an Evangelical theology of encounter, and I must give some closer indication of the lines on which I think such a theology might be constructed. But first I should like to outline the reasons why I think that this is a necessity.

The Christian missionary enters on his task because he is convinced that he is called by God to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ to those who have known neither the name of Christ nor the power of salvation. In some cases he may find that his message is easily understood, and that its reception is uncomplicated by what we might call non-theological factors. Still he must know what is the total attitude to reality which motivates those to whom he is sent. He must understand the meanings—all the possible meanings—of the words he uses, and all the unconscious as well as the conscious factors which affect the reception of the Gospel message, and the desire or lack of desire on the part of his people to take the decisive step of giving their allegiance to the King of kings and Lord of lords. In the case of the so-called higher religions, he has to reckon with a multitude of complicating factors, many of them not immediately recognizable as religious, which may hold up almost indefinitely the reception of the Gospel as good news. Common to all these situations is the fundamental need to know his people and to sympathize with them on the purely human level. But over and above all this is the need within him to give concrete expression to the faith which is in him, whether it be to the primitive and fear-ridden 'animist' or to the sophisticated and highly intellectual Hindu or Buddhist. He must have knowledge; he must have sympathy; he must be faithful to Christ. The first two of these requirements are directly affected by that scholarly discipline which we call 'comparative religion'. The connection may not be so clear in the case of the third; but remember that the Christian, whether missionary or not, must not be a divided personality, retaining a measure of scholarly concern and sympathy 'out of hours', and yet when it comes to thinking in theological terms, abruptly forgetting all this. If his knowledge and his sympathy are not a genuine part of his total Christian personality, then it would be better not to worry about them at all.

Theology for the Christian begins, not with the notion of man seeking God, but with a stance of faith: the conviction that God has been constantly seeking man, and that the absolutely decisive meeting between God and man took place in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ: 'He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory' (1 Tim. 3: 16, which Paul calls 'the mystery of our religion'). So if

I might be so bold as to offer a provisional definition of theology, it would be as follows: 'An attempt to say something intelligible about God, on the basis of the prior conviction, in faith, that God has said something intelligible about Himself'. Theology, in other words, is the systematization of the encounter of man and God, in which God speaks and man responds—or not, as the case may be.

It seems to me important to stress that the divine-human encounter does not, scripturally speaking, begin with the work of redemption. There are two prior stages involved: creation and fall, in both of which the whole of mankind is concerned. In creation, man as man is given the image of God; in the fall, that image is distorted—not, however, entirely obliterated. Before the coming of Christ, man might affirm the image of God in him, so the Old Testament tells us, by radical obedience to the Law. And even before the formulation of the Law, there were those in whom faith—as we know, a total attitude of radical trust and obedience—was operative.

Here I believe the eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews is of great importance. Of the primacy of faith in the New Testament scheme of salvation there can be no doubt; but in Hebrews the scope of faith is widened to embrace all those 'holy pagans' of the past who have stood in a right relationship to God. Faith always involved a choice between the reality of the invisible world and the present order of things, and those who have faith have chosen God's world. Noah and Abraham are advanced as examples of those who have so chosen: Noah by recognizing that this present world is in the wrong, Abraham by abandoning home and country and accepting the lot of a homeless wanderer. Other examples are Isaac, Joseph, Moses and many more—all models of faith who were 'well attested by their faith' (11: 39).

But this chapter does not say that they, their faith notwithstanding, necessarily possessed the fullness of God. On the contrary, they 'did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect' (v. 39f.). Although they had so much: although within the framework of reality as they knew and understood it, they were able to show faith, they did not live to experience the breaking in of the new age which came with Christ—the eschatological reality in which God finally reconciled the world to Himself. It is Jesus who is 'the pioneer and perfecter of our faith'—the consummator, the fulfiller, the one who takes what is incomplete (though good) and makes of it what in the providence of God it was intended to be. The Letter to the Hebrews does not claim that the Old Covenant was perfect of itself: indeed, 'the law made nothing perfect' (7: 19); '. . . if that first covenant had been faultless, then there would have been no occasion for a second' (8: 7). But what it certainly does is to attest to the genuineness and provisional validity of the relationship to God which is entered into prior to the breaking in of the *eschaton*.

Now I think that it is possible to argue that the eschatological reality of Christ is known only when the Gospel message has been *both* proclaimed *and* understood. I emphasize both elements, because both together complete, as it were, the circuit of revelation as it applies to the concrete situation of individuals and communities. Until the message has been made

plain, and either accepted or rejected, there is no justification in speaking of Christ as being an option; the situation is in the fullest sense pre-Christian, and the judgment of Hebrews applies. Faith *is* possible in the pre-Christian situation, just as some degree of knowledge of God is possible. This is not to say that the possibility is always realized; only that it may be. The unknown God worshipped in the 'times of ignorance' (Acts 17: 30) is indeed 'the God who made the world and everything in it' (v. 24), the God who 'made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth' (v. 26).

Prior to the making explicit of the Christian message, there is in all men a hunger for God, implanted by God Himself in the human heart. I cannot think that this is an illegitimate quest, merely proof of man's overweening pride and sin, for in Acts 17 Paul speaks entirely positively of man's quest: 'that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him' (v. 27). Clearly this is not a vain quest. It is worth hoping for—and in the New Testament, 'hope' is never a negatively coloured word. But now the Christ has come, the 'times of ignorance' are over, and the quest is ended.

Obviously, then, there is every Biblical justification for looking upon the religious quest of mankind in a positive sense, as a quest for a God who is willing to be found. And were man perfect and unfallen, then the finding would be as full as the seeking is passionate. But this is not so: between the seeking and the finding there falls a shadow—a net of distorted communication, made up of pride, self-will and all the other ingredients that we know so well as belonging to human sin. Let us not be so foolish as to assert that God has deliberately hidden Himself from the greater part of mankind, even though there may be one or two places in the Old Testament which might seem to give that impression. It is not too much to claim that the quest is, however, in very many cases an unsuccessful one, not because of any inherent unwillingness on God's part to be found, but because of the terrible self-centredness of man, from which he cannot escape except by the grace of God.

A 'religion' is the name we give (perhaps not altogether happily) to the quest for God which man undertakes in the company of his fellow men or in solitude. Some of these we dignify as '-isms' and call 'religious systems'; others we cannot classify so easily, and so we generalize about them as though they were systems ('animism' is a case in point). The student knows that this quest for God, which is (or appears to be) a fundamental part of human nature, expresses itself differently in different parts of the world. Each so-called religion has its own proper doctrine of man, of God (or the gods) and of the world; and can only be understood on its own terms. It is equally true that each religion has its own dimensions of success and failure in what it sets out to do. In Hinduism, for instance, the quest of the Self is set up as a goal, and attained; the failure perhaps lies in the assumption that this can ever be an ultimate goal. Judaism sets up the goal of obedience to the Torah, and in some rare cases may achieve that obedience; but is it ultimate?

What I am trying to say is that while we might, on Biblical grounds, find adequate reasons for taking seriously the human preoccupation with

the beyond, and for abandoning the hoary condemnation of all non-Christian religions alike as 'heathen darkness', yet when we come to try and formulate a theology of confrontation, blanket judgments will not carry us very far. They may perhaps provide us with some measure of conceptual foundation on which to build, and this may be very necessary as a first step. But there comes a time when we have to get down to the concrete dimension of ambiguity, not in 'religion', but in the actual religious aspirations and quests and failures of real men and women.

The Christian faith is exclusive, in the sense of our Lord's words, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me' (Jn. 14: 6). It will not do, I am afraid, to look at the non-Christian religions and see in them evidences of anonymous Christianity, faith in an amorphous cosmic Christ—at least not if these words are understood as fully the equivalent of saving faith and incorporation into the body of Christ. Such attempts may be well meaning, but they betray a lack of acquaintance, not only with the message of the Bible, but also with the actual reality of the religions of the world. Saving faith is never divorced from repentance and incorporation into the fellowship of the Church. Belief implies belonging; and unless there is the desire to belong, one may question the validity of the faith.

But awareness of these issues—knowledge that there is a core of exclusiveness which the Christian may not relinquish—does not mean that the theologian should be harsh or unfeeling in his judgments. Once more we are referred back to the conditions of scholarship and sympathy, of knowledge as a prerequisite of love. If love is present, allied to a lively awareness of the grounds of the Christian's own faith, then the Christian as a missionary may with confidence rely on the Holy Spirit to supply the deficiencies in his own interpretation and attempts to communicate the Gospel. For the Holy Spirit builds bridges of understanding and communication, even out of unpromising materials and in unlikely situations. I am not saying that He will make a theology of confrontation for us, if we are too lazy to make one for ourselves; merely that when we have done all that we can do, He will take what is God's and declare it, not only to us, but to those to whom the message is directed (Jn. 16: 13f.).

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