

**A REVIEW ARTICLE OF
"CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER RELIGIONS",**

Edited by J. Hick and B. Hebblethwaite (Fount, Collins, 1980)

by R. R. Cook

Undoubtedly, a sympathetic interest in other religions is an extension of the ecumenical spirit found among so many Christians this century; at first we heard the plea for interdenominational fellowship, now we are also advised that Christians and Hindus, or Muslims should enter into open dialogue. This new attitude has several causes. On the one hand, many have felt that Liberalism and Modernism have undermined the distinctive foundations of Christian belief, robbing it of its unique and exclusive claims to Truth, with the result that members of other Faiths are viewed as brothers and spiritual equals. On the other hand, Christianity has become increasingly aware of the vital reality of other religions. This is true at all levels. At the academic level, the discipline of Comparative Religion, which only began in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, has noted the high ethical standards found in many of the religions, as well as the remarkable similarity of some of their beliefs to those of Christianity. And at the lay level, we are finding ourselves members of increasingly multi-religious societies: our next-door neighbour might be a Muslim or a Sikh, and may impress us with his piety and kindness. These factors, coupled with the tenacity of the major world religions when confronted with the Gospel, have led to the realization that they need to be respected and understood in all their strangeness and complexity.

But having tried to understand them as best we can, the question remains: what is their status before God? To be more specific in our African context, was (or even is) there salvation through African Traditional Religion? African theologians have given different responses, of course, from the positive replies of John Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu, to the much less hopeful ones of Tokunboh Adeyemo and the late Byang Kato. As we all search the Scriptures with this agonizing question in mind, we should be alert to the seminal theological work that has been done this century. This is where Hick and Hebblethwaite's anthology provides a great service.

Christianity and other Religions contains eleven readings by twentieth century Catholic and Protestant theologians. First comes the transcript of

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a lecture written by Ernst Troeltsch in 1923, just before his death. In it, this old Liberal looks back over a life-time's work, tracing its development towards greater and greater cultural relativism. Once he had rational arguments for the supremacy of Christianity, but now he realizes that they are all invalid. For example, he once believed that Christianity was the ultimate truth since through it alone could a man experience the miracles of conversion to a "higher quality of life". Now he recognizes the impossibility of proving the divine origin of such a conversion, and anyway other religions are not without their converts. Consequently, his present position is that each culture experiences the divine life in its own way, which is valid for it.

Troeltsch's lecture succeeds in exposing the poverty of all arguments which attempt to establish the uniqueness of Christianity on the basis of reason or pragmatism. However, relativism is not the only alternative. Any sound Christian epistemology must have Scripture as its foundation, but sadly this option was not open to Troeltsch with his liberal assumptions. Indeed, the Bible is not even quoted in his lecture.

Next comes an extract from Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. He decisively rejects the approach of the "History of Religions" school (of which Troeltsch was once a member) which assumes the evolutionary development of religions upwards toward Christianity. For Barth, human religion is not man reaching up to God, but man hiding from God. Through it, man "... attempts to justify, and to sanctify himself before a capricious and arbitrary picture of God" (p. 32). In contrast, there is the revelation of God, and Christianity is the true religion in so far as it faithfully expresses the content of this revelation: that man is justified through Christ alone.

Barth bravely stood against a relativistic generation and boldly pronounced the great truths expounded in Romans 1 and 2, but perhaps his was something of an over-reaction. After all, missionaries are sometimes finding elements of truth in other religions which can act as important apologetic bridges in evangelism. Is not this what we find in Acts 17 where Paul introduces his message by referring to the altar to the Unknown God: "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."? Barth's belief that non-Christian religions are totally anti-God results in caricature. For instance, it is factually untrue to say that they are all attempts at self-justification (e.g. salvation in some forms of Mahayana Buddhism depends on the grace and merit of Bodhisattvas [Buddhas-to-be] towards the unworthy faithful).¹

Barth's concept of revelation is precariously imprecise. As he elsewhere states² it is not to be identified with Scripture, which may, however become the medium of this ineffable communication from God. Yet he also insists that the doctrine of salvation through Christ alone is a revealed truth. It is noteworthy that other Neo-Orthodox theologians who share Barth's views concerning revelation as encounter, come to very different conclusions about the extent of God's disclosure. For example, later in the

the book we find John V. Taylor writing: "I believe we should think of every religion as a people's particular tradition of response to the reality which the Holy Spirit of God has set before their eyes" (p. 217).

Barth's contribution is followed by some notes of a lecture Karl Rahner gave in 1961, in which he expounds his notion of "anonymous Christianity". While affirming that Christianity is the absolute religion, he observes that this has obviously not always been so, since it began at a moment in time. The traditional Roman Catholic view has been that since Pentecost, everyone in the world finds salvation only through faith in Christ (c. f. Acts 17 v. 30), but Rahner questions this. He would rather think that this is only the basis for judgement once a culture has been explicitly confronted with the claims of Christ. Prior to this, pagan religion may be considered to be "lawful", that is, although imperfect, a legitimate means of finding salvation. They are saved through Christ although ignorant of the fact. They are anonymous Christians. Rahner is driven to this conclusion by the Biblical teaching that God desires all men to be saved, and by the observation that millions die unevangelized.

These lecture notes are an important part of the book, bearing in mind Rahner's massive influence in both Catholic and Protestant circles (especially the WCC). His compassion for the unreached is admirable, but his optimism regarding their fate was not shared by Paul who, for instance, reminded the Ephesians of their pre-Christian state in these words: "...you were at that time separated from Christ, ...having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2 v. 12). Rahner, who is usually a very clear writer, becomes significantly vague when he defines the anonymous Christian as one who has "...already accepted (God's) grace as the ultimate, unfathomable entelechy of his existence as opening out into infinity" (p. 75). This is so amorphous that virtually anyone could be called an anonymous Christian, and certainly many of Rahner's followers are moving in the direction of universalism.

Fittingly, Rahner is followed by an extract from the Vatican II documents which emphasize the similarity between the world religions, for all contain true and holy elements. There is no salvation without Christ, but "In him men find the fulness of their religious life" (p. 82). That this is a definite shift from the traditional catholic view that outside the Church there is no salvation is confirmed elsewhere in the documents where it is clearly stated that the unevangelized can find salvation.³ It comes as no surprise to learn that Rahner was a theological consultant at Vatican II.

We now have an extract from *Religious Diversity: Essays* by Wilfred Cantwell-Smith (1976). He argues that we cannot afford to ignore other religions or their claims, especially since they are so vigorous and intransigent when faced with missionary activity. We must develop a sophisticated explanation for them: "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?" (p. 100). This explanation cannot depend on a few proof-texts: "The damnation of my neighbour is too weightily a matter to rest on a syllogism" (p. 102). Our exegesis must be tested by experience. Many have modified their understanding of the early chapters of Genesis in the light of evolution theory, similarly we should now be prepared to alter our view of the possibility of salvation outside Christian proclamation. Cantwell-Smith's alternative is simple: "... a Buddhist who is saved is saved only because God is the kind of God who Jesus revealed him to be" (p. 105).

As shall be mentioned later, there is food for thought in this essay. After all, we have our doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, but how do we explain, say, the haunting poetry and noble sentiments of the Qur'an? He is right that our hermeneutic should be tested by experience. For example, Galileo's telescope showed that the doctrine of a fixed earth must have been an incorrect reading of Psalm 96:10. The danger, of course, is that experience and reason become normative instead of the Bible. Unfortunately, Cantwell-Smith has fallen into this trap; the clearly absolutist claims of Christ have been relativized.

Our next extract comes from Tillich's late book: *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions* (1963). It is a deft stroll through history, during which Tillich points out examples of how Christianity has both learned from other religions and also influenced them. For instance, Augustine strongly challenged Manicheanism, but he also learned from it the seriousness of internal evil, and it is through him that the Church gets its doctrine of total depravity. Tillich advocates that this process of reciprocal education should continue as dialogue takes place.

One could carp about the historical accuracy of some of Tillich's examples (it seems more likely that personal introspection and the study of Romans led to Augustine's doctrine of human nature, rather than the influence of Manicheanism), but again the real danger is in his religious relativism. Admittedly, he does assert with his usual fuzziness that Jesus as the Christ is "... a symbol which stands for the decisive self-manifestation in human history of the source and aim of all being" (p. 109), but the overall impression of the extract is that all religions are on a par. The Bible provides us with a standard by which to judge the different forms of Christianity which have emerged throughout Church History but Tillich cannot accept any such external authority.

There follows a rather rambling and vapid extract from *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (1968) by R. Panikkar, a Catholic priest who worked for many years amongst the Hindus of India. He advocates that dialogue take place not on the level of intellectual discussion, but on the existential level of common intuitions and desires for the Absolute. It is an out-working of the anonymous Christian idea: "We meet in Christ; Christ is there in Hinduism, but Hinduism is not yet his spouse" (p. 139).

Next comes a section from *Living Faiths and the Ecumenical Movement* (1971) by S. Samartha, Director of the Dialogue Programmes of the WCC. It is a heartfelt plea for inter-Faith dialogue. One must come committed, but humble, ready to discover truth as well as impart it. Dialogue must not just be intellectual, there must also be shared artistic experiences and group meditation.

Samartha is championing a basically worthy cause, but one senses something a little unreal and romantic about some of the WCC preoccupations. It would seem that communal meditation involves about as much dialogue as a couple asleep next to each other on a bus! But it is true, we do need to learn to speak with, not at. We need to be gentle enough to listen as well as speak, recognizing that we may have things to learn from our non-Christian friend. Yet dialogue dare not replace proclamation, which should not be looked upon as necessarily a symptom of pride or an imperialistic spirit. After all, the Christian message has not evolved from our genius; as John Stott has well said: "The gospel is a non-negotiable revelation from God".⁴

Relativism in an extreme form is found in Hick's own contribution which is based on an article published in *The Modern Churchman* (Winter, 1974). Here is no tentative explorer, but an aggressively incisive thinker who suggests that it is just as acceptable for a Muslim to perceive a Christian as an anonymous Muslim as it is to accept Rahner's thesis! In fact, all the higher religions are equally valid, and are worshipping essentially the same God, as can be demonstrated by comparing the sample prayers which Hick provides. What then, of the exclusive claims of Christ? Simple. Biblical Criticism has shown that He probably never made them. Hick concludes: "We can say that there is salvation in Christ without having to say that there is no salvation other than in Christ" (p. 186).

Needless to say, Hick's cavalier rejection of Scripture and his consequent conclusions immediately alienate him from evangelical thought. It could also be argued that he has been highly selective in his choice of prayers. Other samples could be compiled that would suggest the opposite: that the world's religions have fundamentally different conceptions of God.

An extract from Moltmann's *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (1977) is the penultimate contribution. He reviews and rejects many of the traditional approaches to other religions as forms of monologue and imperialism. In contrast, healthy dialogue "... involves clear knowledge about the identity of one's own faith on the one hand; but on the other it requires a feeling of one's own incompleteness and a real sense of need for fellowship with the other" (p. 204). Real dialogue involves vulnerability and a readiness to change. As a Christian, he does not believe that all religions are equal, but he confesses that any absolute standard by which to judge them is beyond our knowledge.

Moltmann, then, is yet another example of a theologian who precariously

attempts to preserve a non-relativistic position, while refusing to acknowledge the objective authority of the Bible. His assumption that we can learn doctrinally from others is dubious. He cites Islam's emphasis on God's sovereignty as an instance of something that Christians do well to heed, but if we heed it, it should only be because it is already to be found in Scripture. Dialogue is fine, but we must not forget that we are custodians of God's revelation.

Finally comes Bishop John V. Taylor's Lambeth Interfaith lecture: *The Basis of Interfaith Dialogue* (1977). All religions are fallible responses to God's self-revelation and real dialogue between them is certainly healthy. God is concerned with, and at work in, other Faiths as the Bible clearly teaches. For example, Amos points out that, besides Israel, the Philistines and the Syrians have also experienced their exodus (Am. 9:7), then in Malachi 1:11 we read: "From the rising of the sun to the going down of the same my name is great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense is offered in my name and a pure offering." As for the seemingly exclusive saying found in Acts 4:12, well the verse is really about spiritual healing of the body, not the soul. Observing that Christ was crucified before the Fall of Man (cf. Rev. 13:8), Taylor contends: "sinner" (p. 222). All men are "in Christ".

Taylor is unique in the volume because he actually supports his views with Scripture, something none of the others do. Unfortunately, his exegesis is highly questionable. Amos 9:7 establishes no more than the general providence of God governing the nations, and should be read in the context of Amos 3:2. Malachi 1:11 does not necessarily imply that God accepts pagan worship. Even if one disagrees with the NIV translation of the verse as a future prophecy, one may understand it as a reference to the diaspora or to proselytes, or even perceive it as a highly ironical statement to the effect that Israelite worship is even more corrupt than that of pagans. Regarding Acts 4:12, suffice it to say that the majority of commentators from Calvin to F. F. Bruce disagree with Taylor's interpretation.⁵ There is certainly a half-truth in his notion that humanity has been forgiven; God is reconciled to the world (II Cor. 5:19), but the Scripture is clear that faith precedes justification. Those who do not believe are not "in Christ". In fact, Taylor is a blatant universalist as is evident in his other writings.⁶

So we come to the end of our brief survey. The major lesson of the book would seem to be that the rejection of an external authority leads inevitably to some kind of religious relativism and often to the conclusion that not only are all religions acceptable to God, but also all men.

The book contains few references to the kinds of traditional religion that are found in Africa, but what is there is interesting, and may suggest a progressive decrease in Western prejudice! At the beginning of the century, we find Troeltsch's condescending attitude. After establishing that different

cultures experience God in their own way, he writes:

We shall not assume it among the less developed races, where man's religious cults are followed side by side, nor in the simple animism of heathen tribes, which is so monotonous in spite of its many variations. (p. 26).

In contrast, more recently we find Moltmann appreciating these religions for their sensitivity to cosmic ecology:

Perception of the complicated systems of balance which bind together the individual, his community, the natural environment, his ancestors and the gods does not permit the prejudicial adjective 'primitive' to be applied to the animist religions of Africa and Asia. (p. 205).

As has become glaringly apparent, there is no evangelical author to be found in the book. It is doubtful that this is just the result of editorial bias (Hebblethwaite is no radical, contributing as he did to *The Truth of God Incarnate*). It indicates rather that we have not entered the forum of modern debate as we should. In conclusion, some guidelines are suggested for further thought. It may be that we find we shall need to retain the traditional evangelical doctrine that without an explicit faith-response to the Gospel message, there can be no salvation. But the following issues will need to be thought through:—

- 1) Keep firmly before us the supreme authority of Scripture and therefore:
 - a) the hopelessness of man apart from Christ's atoning sacrifice
 - b) the reality of Judgement and Hell
 - c) the fact that Scripture is generally pessimistic about pagan man (e.g. Rom 1 & 2, I Thes. 1:9 f.)
 - d) the imperative of the Great Commission.
- 2) Open ourselves to the reality of actual members of other religions. As Cantwell-Smith says, this may lead us to modify some of our conventional exegesis. For example, too often a passage like Rom 1:18–32 is read as a detailed description of all pagan religion, but does it really apply to the devout Muslim who has a great abhorrence of idolatry and sexual perversion?
- 3) Re-explore the implications of God's desire for universal salvation (II Pet. 3:9, I Tim. 2:4 etc) and His promise to reward the seeker (Heb. 11:6, Ps. 145:17–20). One response might be that it is the fault of the Church that the whole world has not been evangelized, and God is grieving about it. It is often argued that faith in Jesus Christ became the criterion for salvation at the time of Pentecost (cf. Acts 17:30). Was it possible for the Church to bring the Gospel to East Africa at that moment? Is John 15:22 ff. of any relevance here?

- 4) Take account of infants who die, and severely handicapped people who have no chance to learn about the Gospel.
- 5) While affirming the Scriptural teaching that man cannot be saved through General Revelation, explore the implications of Special Revelation to the pagan (cf. Balaam, Nebuchadnezzar's dream which came from God Dan 2:29 etc.).
- 6) While affirming that Scripture denies salvation through other religions, explore the possibility that some might be saved in spite of their religion. The evangelical author J. N. D. Anderson suggests that they might find salvation in the same way that the OT saints did, by repenting of their sins and trusting in God's mercy, Is this a correct interpretation of the basis upon which the Israelites will be judged? Hebrews 11 is a relevant chapter. Did the saved Ninevites (Lk. 11:31 f.) do any more than repent in response to faith in God?
- 7) Evolve a theology of extra-Biblical Scripture. This will undoubtedly involve the recognition of Satanic influence (something the contributors to Christianity and other Religions totally ignore), but surely this cannot serve as a complete explanation. As a working hypothesis it might be suggested that the inspiration behind these Scriptures is not different in kind from artistic inspiration. In both cases, the author often discerns a gratuitous element in what he creates: the poet wakes up with some finished lines running through his head, the pagan prophet speaks out what he has "received". Again, in both cases, the finished work which, if it is great art, will communicate with authority and power, may be a mixture of good and evil, truth and error. But what is the source of inspiration? Unfortunately, this is not the place to attempt an answer to this fascinating question, but the interested reader will find many provocative suggestions in the writings of the great Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung,⁸ and also in the ideas of Canon Stafford Wright who re-works Jung's concepts from a Christian perspective.⁹

1. See e. g. N. Smart, *The Religious Experience of Man kind*, (Fontana, 1971.) p. 134—138.
2. Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics*, 1. 4 III.
3. "Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them." (*Dogmatic Constitution of the Church*, 16)
4. J. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, (Falcon, 1975), p. 59.
5. It is, however, becoming a popular interpretation among religious

- pluralists. See e. g. J. A. T. Robinson's *Truth is Two-Eyed*, (SCM, 1979), p. 105.
6. e. g. J. V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision*, (SCM, 1963) p. 163.
7. J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion*, (Tyndale, 1970), ch. 5. See also his article in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Ed. F. E. Gaebelin (Zondervan, 1979), Vol 1, p. 143–161.
8. The Collective Unconscious is his key idea, i.e. that part of the human race. The artist who can draw up images from this region "... speaks with a thousand voices; he enthral and overpowers, while at the same time he lifts the idea he is seeking to express out of the occasional and the transitory into the realm of the ever enduring" (From the lecture: *On the relation of analytical psychology to Poetry*, in *The Portable Jung*, Ed. J. Campbell, Penguin, 1976) p. 321.
9. See J. Stafford Wright, *Mind, Man and the Spirits*, (Paternoster, 1968), ch. VI