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Religious Exclusivism and the Challenge of Contemporary Evangelization

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Christianity did not enter an "empty-world." We may state with some measure of historical certainty that the Roman Empire provided the "nursery bed" in which the early church was nurtured. Some of the old conceptions common to popular religions which existed earlier than Christianity helped to build up some of its basic doctrinal formulation. For instance the idea of the *LOGOS* propounded by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus became one of the explanatory theological categories of the doctrine of the young church. The Christian doctrine of immortality of the soul was not entirely new because it had been propounded long before Christianity in the philosophy of Plato. Furthermore, the stress laid on individual personality by Stoicism

influenced the Christian understanding and explanation of personal conscience and relationship to God. These and other factors do not in any way deny the uniqueness of Christianity in its origin, content, expansion and mission.

On the social level, the unifying Roman language, good roads, prevalent "Pax Romana", stabilizing force of Imperial Justice, were among the facilities provided by the secular world in which Christianity was born. The relationship between the Greek philosophical thought and Christianity is complex. Christianity, however, had to select what seemed good and profitable to her own survival and expansion. Although Graeco-Roman influence on Christianity at its initial stage was immense, the originality and peculiarity of the life and mission of the

church must not be ignored. The gradual collapse of the Roman Empire from the fourth century on made the Church face another encounter with non-Christian ideologies. Her future survival and continuity as an independent institution therefore depended on her ability to make right choices.

This preamble on the ideological and environmental situation that confronted early Christianity is to enable the reader to focus his attention on the aim of this paper which is trying to look at an age-long problem from a new perspective. The problem of religious exclusivism or inclusivism has faced every past generation. This paper will therefore address itself to an evaluation of how this old problem could be tackled in our own contemporary period in the light of our own existential milieu. The Church is not only existing in a multifaith or pluralistic society, but also in an age that is characterized by racial discrimination, hunger, materialism terrorism, oppression, war, drought, environmental pollution, crime, threat of natural disaster, international conspiracy and sabotage, and a host of other problems. Yet she has the Great Commission to propagate the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all men, in all places and at all times.

It is in the context of the realization of the above task of the church in the

modern world that we shall critically analyze the views of three eminent scholars in recent discussions on the relationship of Christianity with other religions. The three scholars are John Hick, Ninian Smart and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Our approach will be both critical and constructive in order to emerge with a more unified approach that will make the Church conscious of her mission to the present world.

Three views on Religious Exclusivism

The choice of Hick, Smart and Smith is not arbitrary. The three of them represent a group of modern radical scholars whose views on "religious exclusivism" are repugnant to anyone (fundamentalist or liberal) who is still concerned for the mission of the Church. Three principal works published in 1980 and 1981 by these three scholars were overtly against the existence of the Church as a separate institution. In each of the said works, the three men were articulate and consistent in their call on Christianity to take its place as only one among equals in the assembly of world religions. Christianity to them is, at best, to be seen as one of those paths and ways of seeking for the ultimate Reality or among many human attempts to find out the Truth which is far wider than

claims can be made to possess it within the sphere of any one religious tradition.

Jesus had earlier warned the first apostles that they were in "the world but not of the world," probably implying a wise approach to the things they would encounter in their ministry in the world. Paul realized this when Christianity encountered the Gentile world and was cautious. Differing interpretations of this injunction has thrown many people into two diametrically opposed camps of religious exclusivism and inclusivism.

But as we earlier noted, Christians borrowed reasonably from the Graeco-Roman world in order to make the Gospel message intelligible. That could be appropriately referred to as the genesis of the current "inculturation process" which is going on now in some places. But John Hick has vigorously advocated that Christians should reject the idea of religious exclusivism totally. He has opined that the 6th and 7th centuries B.C. were the axial period in the history of religions. It was an epoch when most Eastern religions - Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and the revived prophetic Judaism, blossomed. Hick is of the view that these religions were confined to their ethnic and national borders because of geographical isolation of one place from the other. People could not interact

freely because of mobility problems imposed by lack of communication and transport. Since such isolation that cut off one people from the other is now bridged, we can unite all religions into a homogeneous or monolithic body. The synthesis of all religions (including Christianity and Islam which began after the axial period) is now necessary because we are in closer contact with people of other races, tongues and faiths than our forefather who lived several centuries ago.

Secondly Hick argues that Christianity has not been successful in countries possessing an ancient national religion that has its own scriptures. Christian mission is therefore a failure. Christianity, according to him, does not command large followership in such countries as China, India and Japan that still hold large concentration of the world's population. In these cases, as a minority faith, Christianity could as well give up its right to independent existence and join the other religions as one strong and unified system.

The two reasons of Hick are not convincing enough for Christianity to lose its identity or ignore its mission to the world. Professor Hick has failed to tell his readers which of these Eastern religions has a large following outside its home-base. In trying to unite all forms of religious groups, who would rally around them for the exercise? Is it

the one that has the smallest number of followers or the one that has the largest? This is not another form of an ecumenical movement among the various branches of the Christian Church. This call by Hick is an entirely different one; a total abandonment of identity of Christianity. The abandonment of "blind exclusivism" by Christianity should be done for a more important reason: the Church's realization of her supreme task, the Great Commission. It is her mission to the world that should challenge her to open her arms to embrace those outside the fold so that just as there is one shepherd, there should be one fold. A closed fist cannot receive; should an honest man who holds a correct view abandon his stand because many ignorant or self-willed people do not belong to his camp or have decided to oppose him? The question of the truth of a position does not depend on the number of people who follow it.

Although Wilfred Cantwell-Smith and Ninian Smart strongly share the views of John Hick, that exclusivism should be abandoned, they proffer more cautious reasons for their stand. Ninian Smart, for instance, is more cautious, although he tries to reduce Christ to the level of mere humanity. He tries to explain his grounds in a theory he described as "transcendental pluralism." It is a theory which recognize the reality

of the "Beyond" which according to him is experienced in all the various forms of religions. Unfortunately the ideas of a "Beyond" in the religious systems enunciated by Smart contradict themselves. For instance, a Buddhist concept of the "Beyond" is completely different from a Christian understanding of it.

Christianity accepts the concept of "personality." God is personal in the sense that he can relate to individuals in their personal experiences and encounters with Him. In Buddhism, there is a total denial of personality. Religion to a Buddhist could at best be seen as a "moral principle without God". This is one of the weaknesses of Smart's overgeneralization that "all religions" are or can be a proper channel to the "Beyond." The attempt by Smart to bring in the Christian idea of "self-denial" within the concept of the Buddhist notion of "not-self" (anatta) is merely begging the question. Both are not complementary but contradictory. Probably Smart is thinking of the old Anglo-Catholic theological notion of the Incarnation which is interpreted in terms of "self-emptying" of Jesus of all he is and has (except love). By divesting himself of all his divine attributes and rights, he became a man, and suffered on the cross for the good of mankind. This self-sacrificial death on the cross for the salvation of man, is

re-enacted each time we assemble for the Eucharist - the sacrifice of the Mass. Smart concluded that it is "ludicrous for Christians to try to convert good Buddhists" because the two religions are merely different ways of going towards the "Beyond." This doctrine of "Universalism" is also an error in Smart's conception of the Mission of the Church.

Invariably, the Christian idea of the "Beyond" is different from the Buddhist meaning of Emptiness (*sunyata*). It is not a contradiction of terms to say that the Christian "self-emptying" is for fullness. Self emptying by Christ is not understood in terms of "negating" of his personality but in terms of voluntary offering himself (his personality) in its fullness to be sacrificed for the good of humanity. By so doing, the human race enjoys a "Beyond" which is full of the love of God. To be a Christian is to be full of Christ's life.

In the same vein, W. Cantwell Smith is against the Church's mission to "people of other faiths". To him, the exclusivist attitude breeds the notion of converting others. Christian exclusivist attitude should therefore stop as it nurses unnecessary spiritual pride and the urge to convert others. He believes that a theology of comparative religion will soon emerge and will probably fall along the path of mysticism, although he is not specific on what its content

might be. To Smith, we shall meanwhile be content with being either good Christians or good Buddhists, etc. This is another wrong view based on misunderstanding of the mission of the Church. Universalism has its own problems.

The above summary of the three scholars' stand against exclusivism does not exhaust what has earlier been said of it by theologians and historians. Although people who love and take seriously the mission of Church to "people of other faiths" might not endorse exclusivism, they would on the other hand reject the radical stance of Hick, Smart and Smith which destroys the Church itself.

Exclusivism and Racism

Although the three radical scholars who are opposed to exclusivism deny that the Church has a mission to the world, it is necessary to point out that one other danger of radical exclusivism is "racism." It may be its root. In other words, some traces of religious exclusivism may manifest themselves in "racial discrimination." Some notion of religious exclusivism may be a by-product of racial pride. The nineteenth century churchman in England saw himself as the only possessor of the true knowledge of God. The Spirit of Enlightenment had dawned on him while the "pagans" and

adherents of other religions afar off were still benighted and groped in the dark. The Victorian English churchman, believing that Europe had reached the apogee of human development in culture, religion and science, felt morally obliged to spread the same to those in "utter darkness and ignorance." In a subtle way, the missionary attitude to "other religions" became rooted in "Darwinism" with a moral imperative and assumption of duty towards the "heathens" who groped in the dark. This view was christened the Whiteman's Burden or Manifest Destiny to spread the whiteman's religion, learning and civilization. With this undergirding presupposition, any other form of religion beside theirs was considered "primitive", idolatrous, inferior and should be replaced forcefully in order to "save" the souls of the adherents of those religions. Many missionaries worked with this illusion for a long time. Thus the missionaries' image of non-Europeans, along with the pseudo-scientific arguments for racial superiority, produced an arrogant superiority complex. This was however diametrically opposed to the biblical view of mission (Matt. 28:19ff.). Their attitude toward other cultures and religious systems was characterized by culture-shock, religious exclusivism and racial pride. Missionary iconoclasm

became a feature of evangelism in the field. This negative attitude to other cultures did not bear lasting fruit in the mission fields, especially in the Third World nations of Africa.

By the turn of the century, it became clear to some missionaries that their predecessors had committed some grievous errors by not seeking to understand the cultural and religious systems in their areas of operation before trying to "declare their obituary." Therefore, following the gradual but steady change in the pattern of Christian theology in Europe, some Christian writers developed a new attitude toward the "other religions" in missionary lands. Their perception of non-Christian religions consequently became subsumed in the Church's realization of the world's rich cultural diversity and her awareness that she can no more be a "Western" Church than she could ever have remained a Jewish Church; various missionary bodies gradually change their previous hostile attitudes and policies towards "non-Christian religions". In spite of this more favorable view, the old view of Christians toward "other religions" prevailed and kept some Christians still withdrawn from non-Christians.

From the 1930's, many European Christian missions (especially in Africa) who realized the errors of the early European missionaries and imperialists

in attempting to destroy the traditional cultures and religions, intensified efforts to investigate how some features of traditionalism could be used as the means to propagate the Gospel. Their studies of the traditional languages, cultures and religions therefore took a *praeparatio-evangelica* approach.

This evangelical zeal was manifested in several works that appeared at the time particularly in the writings of eminent missiologists like Professor Hendrick Kraemer. In suggesting ways of communicating the Gospel to people of non-Christian religious background, Kraemer emphasized to the Protestant missionary bodies what he described as the "principles of continuity and discontinuity" with non-Christian elements in mission areas of operation.

In the recent past, even before the devastating criticisms of Hick and his friends on exclusivism, a change of attitude towards other religions has gained currency in the theological debates of the Church. The new shift of emphasis is no longer on the "Church" or on "Christ" but on "God" as the basis of salvation. Thus the history of the attitude of the Catholic Church toward other religions seems to have moved progressively from its previous dogmatic **Ecclesiocentrism** to a less rigid principle of **Christocentrism** and most recently to a broad-based concept of **Theocentrism**.

The Vatican II (1962-65) continued the exclusive ecclesiocentrism of the period which held that there was no salvation outside the Church (i.e. Roman Catholic church). Yet the Council Fathers, while reaffirming that the Church (Catholic) was necessary for salvation, extended as it were the universal possibility of salvation - stating that even atheists could be saved. The view was initially articulated by Karl Rahner, a radical Catholic theologian whose thought strongly influenced the deliberations of the Council. His shift from "Ecclesiocentrism" to "Christocentrism" made him conclude that other non-Christian religions are or can be grace-filled ways of salvation and are positively included in God's plans of salvation. Rahner and Kung (another Catholic theologian) have strongly tried to change the Catholic dogma on this principle of exclusivism. Originally promulgated at the Council of Florence in 1438-45, it states that "no one remaining outside the Catholic Church can become partakers of eternal life: but they will go to the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels, unless before the end of life, they are joined to the Church." Rahner puts forward his idea of the "anonymous" Christian in his attempt to alter the exclusivist notion of "Ecclesiocentrism". His colleague,

Kung, speaks of "ordinary" (world religions) and the "extra-ordinary" (Catholic Church) ways of salvation implying that both the Catholic Church and other non-Christian religions are viable ways to salvation.

These new attitudes have culminated in a phenomenon we now call "dialogue." The term was made known to the Church by Pope Paul VI in the encyclical, *Ecclesia Suam* (6th August, 1964). As an institutional sign of this desire to meet and relate to the followers of other religious traditions of the world, the Holy Father began on Pentecost 1964 in the spirit of Vatican II, the Secretariat for Non-Christians, different from the Sacred Congregation for Evangelization of People. The World Council of Churches has in the same vein started a sub-unit for dialogue with people of "Living Faiths and Ideologies." It is believed that the recent radical theological views by the Roman Catholic Church of other non-Christian religions and cultures and the concept of dialogue, are evidences of her clear understanding of the magnitude of her mission to a fast changing world.

Religious Exclusivism and the Mission of the Church

The stand of Hick and his two friends (and any other person who shares their

views for that matter) is anti-mission. Although an "inclusivist stance" that leads to "universalism" is also counterproductive in mission, no one would ever endorse the idea of a Church that should not evangelize or should accept that "all religions are one". It is sheer reductionism.

Considering some more positive grounds against exclusivism, the mission of the Church to people of all tongues and cultures can be undertaken in the strict biblical sense. This brings us to focus on the **Theology of Incarnation**. The fundamentalists who oppose interaction through dialogue or the current proposals for "Inculturation" may end up with isolating or "writing off" non-Christian religions and thereby failing to evangelize them. Not all processes of interaction can be described as "inclusivism" or liberalism.

It has to be re-emphasized that Christianity is a **Transcendental** faith which is not culture-bound. It is supracultural and does not reject any culture but can manifest itself through every culture by refining, purifying and reforming it, in order to "Christianize" it. It is through such contacts that the Gospel message could be put across meaningfully to people of "other faiths and ideologies." The Lord Jesus who is the Lord of the Universe wants his Gospel to get to every land and "incarnate" itself contextually in all

cultures without special preference to any. It must be mentioned here that in the incarnation, Jesus refused to appear to man as pure, refined Word but as *Word Incarnate*. In trying to understand Christ as the Universal Lord in all cultures and at the same time maintain the uniqueness of the Church, it must be stated that it is **only Jesus** that is universal in an absolute sense. All other confessions which people make of Him are influenced by many variables of culture, language, temperament, etc. It is only through contact with others that the Gospel can get through to people. A Christian who abhors others and keeps aloof to maintain his purity is not the biblical Christian but a "ghetto" religious fanatic.

Another unique feature of Christianity is its **incarnational and transcendental nature**. It is not a "traditional" or "national" religion of any particular country or society. Neither was it designed to save any particular race. This is one of the facts that Hick forgot. He had stated that it was geographical isolation of territories which made it difficult to unite such Eastern Religions like Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism. Except perhaps Buddhism among the above religions which began around 6th and 7th centuries B.C., others were **national**

cults which were confined to their geographical locations. No one was converted into them. People were born into them, although outside enquirers might be admitted without full membership into the cult. Since one belonged to such faiths by birth, it was unreasonable and unnecessary to convert anyone into them; they were not "missionary religions" per se.

On the contrary, Christianity is not a "national religion." It is catholic in the sense of universal and this makes it imperative for all its adherents to preach and plant it in all cultures and nations at all times. Invariably, Christianity contends with any existing religious system wherever it finds itself. It faces persecution from the "host" religion which sees it as an "intruder." For instance it had to contend with animism, polytheism and thorough Emperor-pagan Worship (at one time) in the Graeco-Roman World. In Europe, it also had to fight its way through paganism and atheism of the Dark Ages. Earlier on, Judaism which was its "first chief Host" became its chief enemy when its Christian characteristics became obvious. When it was evident that Christianity was not just a sect of Judaism, zealous Jews persecuted it without relenting. In Africa, the traditional religion of the people did not welcome Christianity which it saw as a foe. We can therefore

see that the transcendental nature of Christianity makes it imperative for the church to propagate it everywhere. No one should claim a "natural" right to it. No one should monopolize or hijack it. This is where exclusivism cannot help in achieving the goals of Christianity as a "world-religion" in a pluralistic society. Nor could inclusivism fulfill the Great Commission of Matt. 28:19.

In the Christian context, the term *Gospel* is the "Good News that God has in Jesus Christ fulfilled his promises to Israel, that a way of salvation has been opened to all." Thus, the Gospel was not understood as the statement of a propositional truth that was taught but rather the proclamation of a fact that is announced by God. An exclusivist in a "ghetto" cannot proclaim the Good News unless he goes out to do so. An "inclusivist" who does not understand the unique nature of the faith, also cannot proclaim it without adulterating it.

One should, however, decipher the difference between the **Person of Christ** and the **Proclamation** of same to others. One is the ontological Truth in itself, while the other is the process of making some thing known. This raises the problem of communicating any "pure Gospel" (in the process of proclamation) totally disentangled from human activity and experience. The idea of keeping Christianity out of other

human experience is unrealistic. The difficulty in identifying such a "pure Gospel" that is completely disentangled from any form of human experience and activity presupposes the communicator using a "culture." Christianity gets hold of a "cultural pattern" and proclaims the Gospel through it. Neither exclusivism nor inclusivism therefore can hold onto the claim of communicating a pure Gospel.

Conclusion

In this brief essay, we have discarded John Hick's reasons for rejecting Christian exclusivism. We have also rejected Ninian Smart's and W. Cantwell-Smith views because they do not portray Christianity as a unique faith. Although the paper rejects inclusivism totally, it does not in any way regard Christianity as one of "the world religions" in the sense that it can be classified as one of many viable means of searching for and finding the Ultimate Reality. Liberalism and inclusivism are of course discounted since neither portrays the Christian faith in its unique salvific nature. Any theological or ideological stance which negates or relegates the mission of the Church to a secondary place, should not be considered as professing an authentic Christian faith.

The old debate on the relationship between Christianity and other religions

will continue to recur in every generation. This is because each generation must discover the Christ for itself. In our own contemporary world, a "ghetto Church" or an "inclusivist church" that ignores the uniqueness of Christianity cannot propagate the Living Christ. Neither liberal inclusivism nor dogmatic and blind exclusivism can propagate the "changeless Gospel to a fast changing world." The withdrawn Christian should respond to the challenge thrown out by Hick and his friends. If we reject Christian Exclusivism or Inclusivism what do we accept?

If we are sincere with the current idea of "Inculturation of the Gospel", the exclusivist stance of many fundamentalists is obviously not going to help the Church in her mission to the world. The liberal and radical inclusivist stance of Hick, Smart and Smith on the other hand repudiates the very existence of the Church as a separate institution. Therefore in an attempt to preach the Gospel to people in a multi-faith situation, a process of **selection, purification and redemption** of the basic cultural elements for effective evangelism, must be made. This will check the danger of reversion to paganism or syncretism in the Church, a problem which radical inclusivism poses. This is where prayers can work. God will reveal

through his Holy Spirit the perfect way to his Church.

One obvious factor is that it is difficult to check the interaction of a Christian with people of different religious beliefs because of free movement of people in the world. We should realize our mission to them at all times and in all places. Because of this new development, our strategy of mission should never remain static but dynamic and completely dependent on the leading of the Holy Spirit.