
THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

by

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The fact and challenge of religious pluralism are not new. The Church was born in a city of crossroads. It began in response to a polyglot witness to a multicultural crowd gathered from across an ideologically diverse and religiously pluralistic empire. Christians have often been a persecuted religious minorit. Even at the height of Christendom's cultural hegemony in the West, committed Christians have probably only been a plurality rather than the true majority of any significant population. But against all odds Christianity has become the one truly global religion and is growing beyond all hope in many regions of the world. Why, then, in the very hour of the Church's greatest expansion and penetration across cultures, do so many leading theologians falter in the face of religious pluralism? Why do so many well-known thinkers now recommend abandoning traditional Christian beliefs in favor of religious pluralism? How should evangelical theologians assess and respond to this new situation, especially those engaged in theological education across the Caribbean? To consider these matters more carefully, I propose to discuss the fact of pluralism, including various types and sources of pluralism, the ideology of *religious* pluralism, three basic responses to the challenge of religious pluralism, and some practical implications for the four dimensions of curricula in our theological colleges across the Caribbean.

The Fact of Religious Pluralism

Ever since Babel, the world has been sharply divided. Today there are more than 5,000 living languages (Grimes). When one adds the barriers of geography and the boundaries of politics, the clusterings of clans, tribes, and ethnic groups, the endless layers of social

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stratification, including economics and education, the myriad permutations of culture, the arbitrary racial distinctions and the accidental ones of gender, temperament, and talent, one is almost surprised to find any larger cohesion at all. The Caribbean is in many ways a microcosm of such diversity. To compound matters, much of Caribbean society is simultaneously experiencing a double transition, both from traditional to modern and from modern to post-modern attitudes, values, and behavioral patterns. Important dimensions such as personal identity and family life sometimes fragment and disintegrate under the pressure of such changes.

Each of the foregoing pluralisms poses serious challenges to the church, but others loom just as large. Western society is just beginning to work out the consequences of its own pluralism of worldviews—traditional theism, Enlightenment scientism, and cultural Romanticism. Fierce battles have erupted between those who want to return to more traditional values, those who prefer to tolerate social differences rather than try to control or stifle them, those who celebrate pluralism as an inherent good, and those who seek to impose “politically correct” speech, behavior, and lifestyles on society as a whole. The sociological fact of ethical pluralism within liberal democracies, one with many historical and cultural ramifications eloquently delineated by Alasdair MacIntyre, has frequently led (on the popular level) to mindless relativism, sometimes even to self-destructive and nihilistic behaviors.

Perhaps no pluralism is more startling than religious pluralism. The United States and Canada boast more than 1,600 religious bodies, some admittedly rather small, but others numbering in the millions (Melton). Even when one limits the scope to Christian groups, David Barrett tells us there are well in excess of 20,000 denominations around the globe. But of course, Western society is by no means limited to Christians. The collapse of established churches, mass immigrations, and the quest for personal meaning have led to such phenomena as the presence of more Muslims than Methodists in England, more psychics than priests in France.

Christian theology reflects many of the foregoing influences, but also its own long history. Theologies split between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian traditions, between East and West, between Rome and Protestants, between Lutherans, Calvinists, Arminians, Anglicans, and Anabaptists, between formal established churches and dissenting free, pietistic ones. The evangelical revivals, the rise of Methodism, and the Holiness, Pentecostal, Charismatic, Third Wave, and Restorationist movements—to say nothing of classical liberalism, neo-orthodoxy, fundamentalism, and Vatican II—have all complicated the picture

enormously. So too has the globalization of theology and the emergence of theologies of and for the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the alienated, and the otherwise neglected or abused members of church and society. There is, among other things, now a significant literature just trying to define what it means historically, theologically, ethically, and sociologically to be an Evangelical.

Theological education reflects and participates in these dimensions even as it adds to and complicates them. Traditional debates over the role and place of philosophy and the humanities in the study of theology recede as newer methodologies are adapted from the social and behavioral sciences. This perhaps, reflects the move away from theology to religious studies. Terms such as liberation, contextualization, globalization, diversification, and pluralism announce new agendas, while also pointing toward a broad shift from *theoria* to *praxis*-oriented approaches to theological education. Case studies, practica, peer reviews, and the like, help *process* information rather than just *dispensing* it through lectures, reading assignments, and memorization. A related sign of the times is the way the language of therapy is replacing the language of theology, especially in the areas of applied ministry.

All the while a significant number of historical centres for ministerial preparation are no longer recognizably Christian, so much so that a secular Jewish sociologist may find herself much more at home in a Methodist seminary with “evangelical” in its name than a poor student so naive as to believe in the authority of Scripture (Kleinman). While Bible schools in the Caribbean may seem fairly removed from certain of these trends, others are already well entrenched.

So diversity and pluralism exist on many levels and in many ways, and understanding this fact provides a better context for the discussion which follows. But our special focus in this paper is on theological education and *religious* pluralism. The next step is to define the nature and ideology of religious pluralism more carefully and systematically. This attempt to delineate the ideology of religious pluralism will also include commentary on and criticism of the various positions.

The Ideology of Religious Pluralism

Religious pluralism has long been a fact in the West, even during the so-called age of faith when Christendom became the dominant socio-political force. The evils of Christendom are well known. Church membership became one’s socio-cultural birthright, rather than a sign of genuine religious commitment, thereby leading to cheap grace,

unreflective faith, and nominal Christianity. Still worse was the physical coercion employed to impose and spread Christianity and the persecution inflicted on those who dared to oppose it. In this light, Anabaptist cries for freedom of conscience and religious toleration were crucial, even if unappreciated at the time. Christian faith was no longer to be forced upon people—a contradiction in terms—but instead became more meaningful and less parochial.

The rise of liberal democracies and the spread of Enlightenment principles of civil tolerance accelerated the movement toward social, political and religious pluralism. While such developments were far better than attempts to create a Christian theocracy by means of the sword, the changes did bring their own attendant problems. Toleration allow unspeakable horrors in the name of religion—human sacrifice, cannibalism, caste systems, child prostitution, and more. On the other hand, less than full toleration may all too easily discriminate against religions which advance absolute, exclusive claims. Langdon Gilkey recommends relativism, unless there are absolute evils such as Nazism; in which case he recommends an absolute stand against them. But he also places the Religious Right in the same camp as Nazis (Hick and Knitter, 37-50, especially, 44-46).

Furthermore, the loss of a universally recognized web of religious beliefs, even if such were acknowledged in name only, means the social fabric tends to disintegrate unless replaced by a new value system. The alternatives tend toward new civil religions—at their worst dogmatic ideologies, whether from the political right or political left—or give rise to religious tyrants (sometimes in cults). These can accelerate the collapse of any common core of values into widespread relativism, syncretism, or nihilism. Sometimes there is simply the extreme isolation of religious minorities, privatizing religion or segregating a specific faith and making it irrelevant to the larger society (Forman).

The ideology of religious pluralism often arises in the milieu of other types of pluralism, but is not necessarily to be reduced to them; for it may exist independently of them. The fact of religious pluralism means that various religions often exist within the same context, though their physical proximity sometimes disguises strikingly different sacred canopies. But the *ideology* of religious pluralism usually goes beyond the recognition of religious diversity, or even beyond calls for toleration of religious differences in a given socio-political context, on to the claims that: 1) religious diversity is in some sense an inherent good, and 2) that superficially separate religions are actually linked or related in some significant manner.

There is, however, often an intermediate step or two between the call

for political toleration of religious differences and a full-fledged ideology of religious pluralism: that is, the recognition that various religions may share certain common assumptions, values, functions, goals, and the like. Thus, Thomas Aquinas could argue that there is an underlying natural law which allows religiously plural societies to still share a common good which binds them together (cf. Berger). One may go further still and suggest that every major religion and worldview reflects important truths, and that Christianity is genuinely enriched when it draws insights from other faiths. Among Evangelicals, these kinds of insights are usually most palatable when tied to acknowledged goods such as mission and evangelism—witness the popularity of a book such as *Peace Child*.

But a full-fledged ideology of religious pluralism goes beyond recognition, toleration or even appreciation of other religions and worldviews to a positive endorsement of them which often entails an ultimate denial of their differences. To state the case more simply and directly, the ideology of religious pluralism claims that in some very important sense *all religions are the same*. Underneath all the apparent particularities and diversities is a deeper unity, or at least a significant level of equality. Determining precisely what that sameness, oneness, or equality means is another matter. The claim that all religions are the same or one or equal does not speak to the questions of whether they are good or bad, true or false, or simply filling a niche in the universe of human experience, whether understood, for example, in the terms of Hegelian negation and contradiction, or Wittgensteinian functionalism.

But what does it mean to claim all religions are the same? On the phenomenological level one must deny all material, social, and cultural distinctions to say that Melanesian frog worship is the same as Christian Science, that African ancestral spirits are compatible with Zen Buddhist denial of all ego-identity. Is the sameness an assertion about religious truth claims, about the meaningfulness of religious experiences, or about the function of religious practices in people's lives? In none of these domains is it at all obvious that *all* religions are speaking the same languages or fulfilling the same roles, much less that they are in some fundamental agreement. Only by adopting a monistic metaphysics like that of Vedanta Hinduism, or some Kantian realm of reality beyond all appearances, or some denial of reality such as one might find in certain forms of Buddhism, or perhaps by some posture of skeptical, pragmatic dismissiveness toward truth itself could one possibly construe all religions to be one and the same. But notice what has happened. All religions are one only by sacrificing nearly everything that would be recognizable to their individual adherents, or even to any mildly

objective observer. Rather, a reductionary worldview in one way or another swallows up all reality but its own, a reality (or lack of it) which it can never prove, but merely assert, however convincing it may appear at first.

Reductionary positions are notoriously difficult to defeat in philosophy when they are held by consistent, sophisticated, tough-minded proponents. But like all philosophical positions, they are maintained at a cost. The price of a reductionary position is the total annihilation of everything else in view, including any external grounds for the position itself. The philosopher is left in the sorry state of asserting things which cannot in the end be defended apart from appeals to simplicity (Ockham's razor)—which, however important in itself as a logical or scientific virtue, is neither strictly self-evident, nor necessarily the same as the truth, nor even logically internal to the systems invoking its application (this latter is a decisive criticism since the systems are reductionary ones). Then too, there is a question of praxis. Reductionary philosophies are, in the end, all but impossible to live by, just as a radical skeptic cannot consistently assert anything, but must either remain a mute or risk self-contradiction.

Perhaps the claim that all religions are the same really means something else. Perhaps all persons who have a genuine religious experience have the same experience. But this too is ambiguous. Does it mean everyone's religious experience is phenomenologically the same? If that is the claim, then it can be maintained only by denying almost endless personal testimonies to the contrary. People's religious experiences vary enormously on a subjective level, and some persons claim not to have any such experiences at all. Or perhaps this is some sort of claim that religious experiences are too private and subjective to communicate, and in that sense they are all the same. But again, this flies in the face of numerous witnesses to the contrary. *Some* religious experiences may be too personal and subjective to share and may defy inter-subjective communication; but surely not all experience can be so restricted, not if human testimony means anything whatsoever. Some persons may also want to apply Wittgenstein's private language argument at this point: since language is inherently social, it makes no sense to speak of a private language, not even in the realm of religious experience.

But there are other senses in which all religious experiences might be said to be the same. Perhaps all *genuine* religious experiences are those which reach out and touch some kind of Kantian reality beyond all phenomenological appearances. This seems to be the position of John Hick. While there is nothing straightforwardly illogical about it, it begs

all sorts of questions about the nature of reality itself. Furthermore, it not only denies the phenomenological experiences of individual believers who give a different account of their own experiences than Hick gives, but it also denies the doctrinal claims of any exclusive religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This is important because Hick wants to appear more humane and compassionate in his approach to various religions than are the more orthodox followers of exclusive religions. But he can do so only by obliterating the traditional claims made by exclusivist religions, thereby destroying the religions themselves. When Hick calls for a "Copernican revolution" in religion, a move from the Christocentric focus of traditional Christianity to his own vision of a theocentric religion beyond any existing religion (excepting, perhaps, certain philosophic streams of Hinduism), then he has imposed his own vision of what ultimate reality and true religion are and ought to be on everybody else.

Perhaps this is the point to reiterate that many of those most opposed to the ideology of religious pluralism are the very adherents of non-Christian religions in whose name some Christian theologians now advocate religious pluralism. Those non-Christians who do favor pluralism often do so because it affirms their own religious position (e.g., Hinduism), not because they are genuinely open to other positions.

Of course, some might say that the claim that religious experiences are all the same was really something more benign, perhaps, *mutatis mutandis*, not unlike Paul Tillich's penetrating observation that everyone has an ultimate concern. It is just a question of which ultimate concerns might be legitimate and which are idolatrous. On this account of religious experience, religions might be taken as a sign or evidence that humans are inherently religious beings. That, in turn, might be a sign or evidence that there is a proper object of religious experience. None of this would constitute a formal proof of anything; but if it did show something, it would be so far from contradicting traditional Christianity as to actually support it. But what is not clear is how this particular claim of widespread or even universal religious experience would give any special support to the ideology of religious pluralism. For the fact that many, most, or all persons have some religious experience would not imply religious experiences are all true, nor that they are all legitimate, nor that they are all alike in any other significant way.

There is another matter which is frequently overlooked but seems worth noting. The claim that all religions are the same usually involves a significant assumption, namely, that religions can be considered the same if one or two key dimensions of religion or religious experience can be shown to be the same. But such an assumption betrays a very

deficient concept of religions. For religions, including the Christian faith, are complex, multidimensional entities. I have suggested elsewhere that nearly all religions reflect at least twelve distinct dimensions and cannot be satisfactorily reduced to just a few of them (Erdel). The irony is that the very scholars who are in the best position to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of religions instead focus on a few aspects which give a false sense of commonality. Boars and bull elephants both have tusks, and both are relatively intelligent mammals, but that is a long way from demonstrating that pigs and elephants are the same animal.

Some would not say that religions are the same per se, but merely that they all lead or point to the same ultimate truth. But this too is problematic because religions seem to point in very different directions. About the only way which one could make such a claim is to give an a priori (even if unacknowledged) analysis which simply presupposes what sorts of things religions disclose. Again, the agenda of the committed religious pluralist is quite external to individual religions, and denies them the dignity of their own claims.

Variations on the foregoing are that all religions partake of the same truth, if only in part, or that all religions share some part of ultimate truth or reality, just not necessarily the same part or to the same degree. This sort of modified claim might have some merit, and by itself does not necessarily constitute a threat to traditional Christianity, depending on how the claim is understood. We might be able to show that there is indeed common ground between Christianity and every other religion or worldview. This should not surprise us if we take the Christian doctrines of Creation, of the *imago dei*, of human depravity, and of the universal *logos* seriously. But that is a far cry from accepting conclusions that are often drawn from this point, namely, that all religions therefore lead to salvation, or that religions should merge to maximize the truth. The problem with drawing these latter implications is that to do so overlooks the enormous admixture of error and falsehood which also permeates non-Christian positions. *Some* elements of non-Christian religions may point to the truth, but as many or more point directly to disaster, at least from a traditional Christian perspective. *Some* insights may be profitably gleaned from other worldviews, but uncritical syncretism leads to enormous confusions which are all but impossible to correct retrospectively—witness the deeply entrenched Christo-paganisms prevalent throughout parts of Europe and much of Latin America. Syncretism by itself does not guarantee improvement. Things may get worse. Religions are not only notoriously error-ridden, but they often encourage enormous evils. Mixing them together does not resolve these problems.

Another form of religious pluralism claims that all religion are in some sense equal if they are not one and the same. Most commonly the basis of equality is the notion that truth, or at least religious truth, is relative rather than absolute. But relativity has its own well-known problems. If the claim of relativity is a final one, then it is immediately self-contradictory since then there would be, at least one, absolute. But if the claim is a provisional one and is held honestly, then one must always be open to the possibility that one religion may offer final truth after all. While the tough-minded provisional relativist may be difficult to convince, intellectual honesty will at least require her to remain open to the possibility of truth, and will block any a priori commitment to religious pluralism.

Still another premise that is commonly asserted as part of the impetus toward accepting the ideology of religious pluralism is that since the Enlightenment has discredited traditional forms of religion, we must now accept new, more enlightened ones. But the claims of Enlightenment modernity are under fierce attack from both traditional and post-modern philosophers. As Thomas V. Morris (see also Stump and Kretzmann) has pointed out, many of the best philosophers now alive see no reason to accept the claims of Enlightenment skepticism or to embrace the liberal theology which derives from it. Liberal theologians still accept Enlightenment skepticism as their most fundamental working assumption, but that is the very dogma now being rejected by cutting edge philosophers in both Anglo-American and Continental streams of thought.

Some who promote the ideology of religious pluralism do recognize that modern Western philosophy is in deep trouble, that epistemological foundationalism can no longer simply be assumed, and therefore look instead to post-modernism's dismissive approach to truth. Christianity is not true in any unique, exclusive, or universal sense because the notion of truth itself is a false and misleading one. There is no such thing as truth, and to try to hold on to the category of truth is like trying to do chemistry on the basis of discredited pseudo-elements like ether or phlogiston. There is not enough space to explore the post-modernist project in depth. But perhaps a few comments are in order. First, all such rejections of truth must still make implicit appeals to truth in order to make their case, so at least *prima facie* there is a basic self-contradiction. Second, the denial of *all* truth, whatever else it might imply, does not obviously advance the case *for* the ideology of religious pluralism, for the point would be that *nothing* is true, including religious pluralism. Religious pluralism could only be recommended on aesthetic or pragmatic grounds.

One pragmatic ground which people do recommend as a basis for religious pluralism is the realm of *praxis*. We can all participate in projects which promote human emancipation and liberation. In one sense, who could object? But ethics does not replace theology, and the list of recommended common goals to be shared by all religions usually reads like the latest social agenda of faddish left-wing intellectuals. Muslims may not be too eager to promote the aims of Western secular society, nor may Hindus or traditional Christians for that matter. The proposal to focus on ethical issues is rather dubious in terms of the specific actions proposed to date.

One final comment about the ideology of religious pluralism. C. S. Lewis suggested in *De futilitate* that there are ultimately two great options for serious thinkers, Hinduism or Christianity. All other philosophies and worldviews are in some sense precursors to or derivative from them (1967, 71). The proposal here would be that the ideology of religious pluralism, for all its variations, is essentially the abandonment of Christianity and the adoption of Hinduism. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Caribbean Conference of Churches theologian who is probably most open to religious pluralism, Dale Bisnauth, reminisced recently at a conference held in Kingston about his Hindu childhood in Guyana and spoke of the wisdom of returning to his Hindu roots (1991, cf. 1982). Nor is it surprising when a scholar such as Rajeshwari Pandharipanda welcomes John Hick's position, even while recognizing that it appeals to her precisely because it is essentially a Hindu rather than a Christian stance. So even if the ideology of religious pluralism were correct--and there is no good reason to think that it is--it is not at all compatible with traditional Christianity, a point Langdon Gilkey is perceptive and honest enough to acknowledge (Hick and Knitter, 37-50).

Three Responses to the Challenge of Religious Pluralism

Theological educators have generally responded to the challenge of religious pluralism in one of three ways. Some have eagerly embraced the ideology of religious pluralism. This seems to be a straightforward case of *compromise* and *capitulation*. It simply discards wholesale the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ, the authority and finality of Scripture, the infinite-personal triune God of Christianity, the Church as the Body of Christ, and so forth. Although this is often done in the name of Christian love and tolerance, the end result is a new form of intolerant exclusivism which denies the Good News of Jesus Christ and replaces it with another gospel.

In contrast to the theological compromise and capitulation of the first response, other theological educators respond to religious pluralism with *condemnation* and *caricature*. Students are kept, whether by design or default, in isolation from other religions or worldviews and are not required to seriously engage them. If the first response is *theologically irresponsible*, the second is *apologetically irrelevant*. It has nothing to say to persons outside its own narrow in-group. Alumni of such programs are ignorant and ill-informed, narrow and parochial in their understanding of the world around them.

The third response, the one obviously being recommended here, is one of *critical dialogue* with other religions and worldviews. Critical dialogue has several prerequisites. It requires mutual respect, thoughtful listening, knowledgeable inquiry, recognition of the multi-dimensionality of the other's situation, creative interaction, careful cooperation and, when appropriate, concerned confrontation. Critical dialogue is genuine dialogue, that is, it goes both ways. It begins with the expectation that each side has much to gain and learn from the other, and it remains open to the possibility that one or both may be changed profoundly by the process. But the dialogue is critical, because it is motivated not only by loving openness, but also by a profound concern for the truth. Every claim must be subjected to rational analysis and the Word of God. Because it is critical, it retains its theological integrity. Because it is dialogue, apologetics is possible.

Critical Dialogue: Implications for Curricula in Theological Education

Theological education has four poles which, when taken together in their totality, constitute its curricula. They are the classroom, the chapel, the church, and the library (Dunkley). Theological education which is deficient in any of these areas is sorely lacking. The role of critical dialogue in response to religious pluralism will be considered with respect to each of these four dimensions.

The classroom entails faculty, students, course offerings, degree programs, pedagogical methods, teaching environment, and so forth. Each of these needs to be pluralized in various ways in order to offer a well-rounded classroom experience. For example, Walter Kaiser suggests four ways in which a faculty should reflect a healthy pluralism (that is, age, methodologies, competencies, and educational experience—the latter coupled with diversity in socio-cultural, ethnic, and gender perspectives). Or again, James Gustafson describes at least seven distinctive teaching styles which bring fruitful diversity to theological pedagogy.

But beyond each of these important elements, thoughtful consideration should be given to how issues of religious pluralism can be kept before students in the classroom. This entails, to take a specific example, not only making sure that courses in anthropology, world religions, philosophy, apologetics, and the cults are offered, but that courses not so obviously centered on questions of worldview still grapple with the implications of learning and applying their material in a religiously plural world.

The chapel refers to the social, psychological, moral, and spiritual formation of the student, especially as it occurs in those structured experiences and programs designed to enhance personal growth, yet also as the result of a school's "hidden curriculum". Concern for this dimension is a traditional strength of Bible colleges, although this domain is much more difficult to measure and monitor than mere academic achievement. It is all too easy to graduate academically gifted students whose ministries remain ineffective because of inadequate character formation, often reflecting unresolved psychological problems.

Once again, in addition to traditional approaches and concerns, issues of religious pluralism should enter chapel and character formation. A simple first step is to schedule chapel fora which introduce the campus community to articulate representatives from other religions and worldviews, but a creative Dean of Students can encourage many other activities as well.

The church refers not only to one's worship and Christian service, but to the whole spectrum of fieldwork experience, including labs, practica, apprenticeships, internships, cross-cultural exchanges, and more. These can provide ideal contexts in which to come face to face with the realities of life and ministry, including religious pluralism. Every student should have some *structured* fieldwork experience which provides direct encounters with other religions and worldviews.

Not least among the four dimensions of theological education is the library. The role of the theological library is in some respects very simple. It serves to multiply experience. The library undergirds and enriches each of the other three poles of the curriculum, but it also goes beyond them to supply experiences which they cannot otherwise provide. The classroom, the chapel, the church, or fieldwork may bring one into contact with a few cultures or worldviews, the library offers access to dozens of them. If it is a graduate or research library, the number may increase to hundreds or thousands of perspectives. Libraries offer a breadth, depth, and scope which cannot be found anywhere else. Woe to the school which does not develop its library in a manner which will bring students into critical dialogue with the whole

realm of human thought and experience. A school without the vision for providing such resources is truly impoverished.

Religious pluralism presents multiple challenges on various levels to theological educators. I suggest that we should respond to the fact and ideology of religious pluralism with a posture of *critical dialogue*, welcoming the implications such a stance will have for our theological curricula in all their dimensions.



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