

PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

There can be little doubt that the cluster of issues suggested by the words 'religious pluralism' is among the two or three sharpest challenges faced by contemporary Christianity. This brief editorial can do no more than sketch some church-historical perspectives that are rarely observed in the debate. This is not to deny the necessity of biblical and theological responses, but merely to ask some pointed questions that are surely inescapable.

Both Protestant and Catholic theologians are now not infrequently found arguing that the various religions of the world represent different, but equally valid, responses to a single divine reality. An obvious corollary is that Christians should not seek to convert Moslems or Hindus, and certainly not Jews. Christianity should not be regarded as superseding Judaism. Whatever the aims of engagements between representatives of different faiths, the Christian mission, so it is claimed, should not set out so to change the allegiance of adherents of other religions that they become Christians and are baptized.

Such in a nutshell is the stance of those who so welcome the *fact* of religious pluralism – experienced in Britain as the presence of sizeable populations of Moslems and others, and globally by the resurgence of major world faiths – as to turn it into a religious and theological *programme*. But when, we may ask, did it become wrong for Christians to pursue the conversion of Buddhists, for example? Only relatively recently – in the last few decades – has the religious-pluralist case become respectable in Christian thought. But should it have been so earlier, perhaps much earlier? Should it have been so held as God's truth in the late eighteenth century as to have precluded the birth of the modern missionary movement (which the 1992 anniversary of William Carey's 1792 initiatives has brought freshly to mind)?

But why stop there? Was it right of Christian missionaries to bring the gospel to Britain and endeavour to rescue our ancestors from the darkness of Druidism, Celtic paganism and the like? Indeed, if Christianity should not today seek to convert Jews, should it – from the perspective of what was theologically right in the sight of God – ever have done so? Was not only the worldwide expansion of the church in the last two centuries a mistake, and not only the first forays of Jesus-people from Palestine into the intellectually and culturally far superior Graeco-Roman world unpardonable arrogance, but also even the earliest missions by apostles and others in Judaea and Samaria and Galilee a false step?

The champions of religious pluralism, often without recognizing it, are setting shocking question-marks against most of world Christianity throughout most of its history. It is doubtful if any worthwhile concept of divine providence in history or of tradition can survive their depredations. Yet they cannot escape the irony of their position as themselves the products, directly or indirectly, of Christian missionary enterprise. Even Scotland – to say nothing of ‘God’s own country’, the USA – was once a wholly pagan country! *Without evangelism whose aim was the conversion-and-baptism of adherents of other religions, Christianity would never have been more than a movement among Jews in Judaea.*

Critics of the case for religious pluralism often accuse its proponents of a kind of selfish discrimination against believers of other faiths. By foreclosing on missions to Sikhs and others they are in effect depriving them of the opportunity, even the right, to hear the Christian message – which presumably they value highly themselves and are still happy to propagate among the West’s myriad non-religionists. The same kind of argument can be given an historical thrust. If it was ever right to convert worshippers of other cults in Britain, why has it ceased to be so, and when?

This line of reasoning may merit further development elsewhere. Perhaps sufficient has been said to show that the adoption of religious pluralism by John Hick *et al.* is not sustainable without viewing most of Christianity in time and space as at best questionable – and at the same time cutting off

the branch on which they are sitting. The great Scots preacher James S. Stewart once noted that some people did not believe in mission. He was not perturbed. They had no right to believe in mission, he commented, since they did not believe in Christ.