

YOUR GOD, MY GOD, OUR GOD

“In this tightly argued and lucidly written little book, Wesley Ariarajah offers a staunch response to those academics who recently have been calling for a ‘moratorium on the theology of religions.’ He makes clear that the urgency of engaging followers of other religious traditions provides the opportunity to review, reform, and re-appropriate one’s own. In both college classrooms and parish discussion groups, this is a book that will engage and inspire.”

Paul F. Knitter

Paul Tillich Professor of Theology, World Religions, and Culture,
Union Theological Seminary, New York

**YOUR GOD,
MY GOD,
OUR GOD**

*Rethinking Christian Theology
for Religious Plurality*

S. Wesley Ariarajah



**World Council
of Churches**
Publications

YOUR GOD, MY GOD, OUR GOD
Rethinking Christian Theology for Religious Plurality

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To
Diana and Dorothy,
in celebration of decades of friendship

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PREFACE

Is religious plurality within God's providential purpose for human life? If so, is God in an ongoing saving relationship with peoples of many religious traditions? And if we do believe this to be the case, what can we, as Christians, make of our belief that God offers salvation to all humankind through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and has mandated us to bring this Good News to all the corners of the earth?

The questions I have formulated above represent a theological quest that has drawn the attention of all serious theologians in our day. It also engages persons in the pew, who are increasingly under pressure to respond to today's persistent and irreducible religious plurality and the theological and pastoral challenges it presents.

In this volume I am addressing this issue not by calling for even more intense interreligious engagement and dialogue or by proposing yet another model of theology of religions. Rather, this volume is based on the conviction that both our interreligious engagement and our theology of religions would soon run into dry ground unless we, as Christians, radically rethink and reformulate our Christian doctrinal and theological concepts in the context of religious plurality.

This volume, therefore, takes up some of the foundational doctrines of the church, such as God, sin, salvation, the person and work of Christ, and mission, with the goal of rethinking them for a religiously plural world. I am aware that I am not the first one trying to rethink the doctrines of the Christian faith. Many others have been rethinking one or other of the doctrines of the church from other stated perspectives; in fact, I have drawn heavily on what has already been done by others. The service of this volume is to look at the main doctrines of our faith together and in their interrelationship in order to make some radical proposals for new directions in which we might move.

Any attempt to rethink the major Christian doctrines in a short volume is an arduous and risky enterprise. The gravest dangers are reductionism and overgeneralization, and I am sure you will find me guilty of both at a number of points. My own greater concern has

been that I will not be able to do justice to all the rich traditions of the church that have contributed to the development of these doctrines. Even though there are some references to the Roman Catholic Church, there is a Protestant focus here with conspicuous absence of the Eastern (Orthodox), Pentecostal, Charismatic and other traditions. I ask for your understanding. As you read the volume, you would find that I had to make sacrifices in this area in order to press forward with my central concern of calling for new foundations to build a Christian theology that is relevant to religious plurality.

The history of Christian doctrines is extremely complex, and they developed over centuries in diverse socio-political, cultural and colonial contexts. I am aware that the discussions here do not do full justice to this history. The emphasis is on where we might move to rather than where we come from, except to the extent to which the past throws light on the need for a new future.

I wish to thank Paul Knitter, who has been a source of inspiration; Hans Ucko, my former colleague at the WCC; and my wife, Shyamala, for reading an early draft of the manuscript and giving me useful feedback. And I am also indebted to my current colleague and friend, Catherine Keller, for her encouragement—or should I say for the gentle push from time to time to complete the manuscript in the midst of many other pressures. I owe a great debt to Michael West, Publisher of WCC Publications, for his creative suggestions to improve the text and his assistance in getting this volume into your hands.

I am happy to hear from readers about the ideas formulated in this volume, and I can be reached at wesley.ariarajah@gmail.com.

I am pleased to dedicate this volume to Diana Eck of Harvard, a friend and co-pilgrim in interfaith relations for over two decades, and to Dorothy Austin, her partner and my friend and former colleague at Drew. They have been unsparing in their love and friendship to me and my family.

1. THE LONG SEARCH

A PERSONAL JOURNEY

The request came to me as a surprise. Would I, as the Director of the Dialogue Programme of the World Council Churches at that time, facilitate the participation of some “guests” from other religious traditions at the World Mission Conference to be held in San Antonio, Texas, in May 1989? Why would one want to have guests of other religious traditions at a conference on World Mission, which is intended, among other things, to discuss effective ways of making Christians of other peoples, I wondered. Is it reasonable to expect people of other religious traditions to sit and listen to mission slogans about “perishing millions,” “reaching the un-reached” or “winning the world for Christ” that are invariably rehearsed at such mission conferences by a strong stream within the missionary movement? What, if any, would be the role of these guests at the conference? These were the immediate questions that arose in my mind as I read the request.

The request, however, had a history behind it. The WCC had instituted the practice of inviting some guests of other religious traditions since its 5th Assembly in Nairobi (1975). But then the Nairobi assembly had a programme feature on dialogue with people of other religious traditions and a section (discussion and working group) on “Seeking Community with People of Other Faiths and Ideologies.” It was thought that the subject warranted a conversation in the presence of and with neighbors of other religious traditions. But would it be appropriate to have such guests at a mission conference?

The internal discussion among colleagues in the Dialogue Programme was difficult. One line of thought was that it would be an insult to invite people of other religious traditions and talk about missionizing them in their very presence. The other was that their presence might help the conference to have a less aggressive and a more realistic discussion on the meaning and practice of mission in our day. We were also well aware of some of the new directions in the discussions about mission that regarded religious plurality with the seriousness it deserved. The larger question

was: which of our friends in other religious traditions would really want to be part of a Christian mission conference?

After much discussion, we decided that we would approach some representatives of other religious traditions who were familiar with the internal diversity of the church. They would be well aware of the strong stream within the church that holds converting others as their mandate. We also decided to approach people who would be willing and able to engage in conversations and dialogue within the atmosphere of a mission conference. So the participation of guests was facilitated; and as expected, it was mixed blessing.

The purpose of recalling this event is not to give a full account or assessment of what happened but to highlight one of the encounters within the conference that left a deep impression on me. In the section in which I participated, an articulate bishop from Asia took the issue of dialogue with people of other religious traditions head on. The gist of what he said, as I remember it now, went along these lines: “I am convinced that dialogue is a subtle way of undercutting the urgency of mission. We are under the mandate to preach the Gospel to all nations and make disciples of them; we know that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life and no one can come to the Father except through him; we are aware that the Bible says that there is no other mediator between God and man [*sic*]. There is no salvation outside Christ. And what this conference should be doing is developing strategies for the evangelization of the world.”

It did not come as a surprise to me, but I was keen to know how this was received by one of the persons of other religious traditions at the meeting. At a quiet moment I took up the matter with the Hindu participant. “I am aware, Wesley, that you do not share those sentiments, and are even embarrassed about what we heard,” he told me. “But tell me: isn’t what the bishop is saying the necessary conclusion in light of the Christian understanding of human beings and the role of Christ in their salvation?”

I was stuck. On the one hand, I wanted to assure my friend that I deeply respected his religious tradition and did not consider him as “lost” in his religious faith. On the other, I could not deny that the way we have understood the human predicament, salvation, and the role of Christ in it does make him a necessary object of our mission.

If I were to be honest with him, I had to admit that according to what I have been taught as my Christian faith, he is indeed in need of the salvation that we believe God has offered in Christ to all humankind. At the same time, I did not believe that he was “lost” because he is of another religious tradition, and I firmly believed that God’s love and grace are fully present in his life. But how could I, in all honesty, say the latter when I stood within the former? The profound gap between our new approaches to people of other religious traditions and Christian theology was staring me in the face!

Personal journey

My own interfaith journey began in my home country of Sri Lanka. It is a predominantly Buddhist country (63 percent Buddhist) with sizable minorities of Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities. Sri Lanka had been a colony since the beginning of the 16th century, successively under the Portuguese, Dutch, and British. During that period the Christian churches had much power and enjoyed many privileges. Those included control over the nation’s institutions of education, health care, and social welfare. All these helped in the evangelistic mission of the churches.

The country became independent of British rule in 1948. Now the Christian minority of about 7 percent of the population had to find its place in the new context of Buddhist and Hindu revival and nationalism. These religious traditions were seeking to recover the ground lost during the colonial era. The Buddhist majority, in particular, had suffered many setbacks under colonial rule. Now in power, it took several steps to reinstate the place of Buddhism in the nation, which invariably involved cutting the influence of the churches down to size and removing the power bases on which they had built their authority, privileges, and the assumed sense of superiority. Most schools were nationalized, and state funding assistance was withdrawn from any schools run by religious groups. Missionary sisters from abroad were barred from working in hospitals. Sunday was made a working day (later withdrawn for commercial reasons) in preference to the Buddhist Poya holidays. Buddhism was declared a religion under state protection.

Most Christians were dismayed by these developments and complained bitterly. But they acted as if nothing had changed; they

were still basking in the lingering assumptions of the superiority of the Christian faith and advantages they had enjoyed during colonial rule. Some, however, were conscious that we were facing a new reality that needed a new response. They saw the urgency of rethinking our approach to other religious traditions, of building our relationships with Buddhist and Hindu neighbors on new foundations, and of the challenge to reinterpret and re-present the Christian faith as one that respects other ways of being and believing.

The late Lynn A. de Silva, one of the pioneers of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, drew me into the work of the Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue, in Colombo, which broke new ground on Buddhist-Christian relationships. The institute was fortunate to have the collaboration of the other pioneering institution, the Tulana Research Center, led by the renowned Jesuit theologian Aloysius Pieris. Pieris lifted up the enormity of the challenges facing the Christian tradition in the context of Asia's crushing poverty and profound religiosity and articulated new ways of doing theology with these realities. Perhaps no other Asian theologian has been able to articulate with greater clarity the theological challenge that Buddhism poses to the Christian tradition and to show creative ways of dealing with it.

The global scene

The invitation in 1981 to join the staff of the Interfaith Dialogue Programme of the World Council of Churches, in Geneva, opened up new opportunities. Now my work on interfaith relations had to be done in a global scene. Directing the WCC Sub-Unit on Dialogue for over ten years entailed organizing numerous dialogue events that brought two or more religious communities into interaction in several parts of the world. This resulted in the building up of a fascinating network of interfaith relationships.

There was another interesting aspect to this work. It involved visiting churches and Christian groups in different parts of the world to convince them that the church was facing a new situation in a religiously plural world, one that demanded new ways of thinking and being. This was, in fact, the more challenging aspect of my work. Most Christians have been brought up to believe in the uniqueness and superiority of the Christian tradition and in their "obligation" to preach the Gospel to their

neighbors. Even Christians who neither actively practiced their faith nor were involved in preaching the Gospel to others had the firm conviction that they were part of a superior “saved” community in an “unsaved” world.

For Protestant Christians, who were my most common audience, the Bible proved it all. After all, the Bible claims that Jesus is the “Way, the Truth, and the Life” and carries the unequivocal commission to “Go out and preach the Gospel to all nations.” Resistance based in the Bible was the most common challenge I had to deal with. This drove me to address the issue in a popular volume, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths*. It was a tentative attempt to build a biblical basis for interfaith dialogue, but the book received wide acceptance. People in different countries began to translate it into their own languages without any attempt on the part of the WCC to promote such translations. Eventually we ended up with twelve translations, including in languages into which very few WCC books gets translated: Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Arabic, Malayalam, Thai, German, Dutch, Swedish, and Spanish. The English version was re-printed in Sri Lanka and India to make it affordable. In Australia the book was put into audiocassettes to help those who are sight-impaired and for the use of those who “heard” books during their long commutes by car to and from their places of work.

It was clear to me that the success of the book had very little to do with the author but rather with the *subject* it dealt with. I was struck by the new mood in the churches. Most people, who live in daily interaction with neighbours of other religious traditions, were clearly dissatisfied with the classical approach of the churches to peoples of other traditions. Yet they believed that they must hold on to such views because the Bible, the Word of God, and the preacher on Sunday mornings told them that they had little choice in the matter. In other words, an exclusivist understanding of the Christian faith was believed to be the only option open to them. Such exclusivism was presented as a matter of faith and faithfulness to the Gospel. What the book did was to show that perhaps there are other ways of reading the Bible, leading to new conclusions and possibilities.

The reception the book received reconfirmed my faith in the people in the pews. They, unlike many of the clergy and most theologians, interact with peoples of other religious traditions on a day-to-day basis in the

routines of daily life; they come to know them as praying and believing peoples in spiritual traditions that have produced saints and sages. They see in many of their neighbours a spirituality and ethical life that clearly could only be described, in Christian terms, as the “fruit of the Spirit.” The disjunction between actual experience and what they believed to be the Christian and biblical teaching has been, to say the least, confusing.

But there were more issues. Their daughters and sons fall in love with people who are not part of the Christian tradition; the church frowned upon such interfaith marriages. They are often called to pray with others in situations of war or a calamity in the community; the church had not equipped them to pray with others. The missionary impetus given to them was based on the belief that the other religions were in error, false, inadequate, or preparatory; but often they see people who are already deeply religious and content with their religious beliefs. How could mission be done when the belief that one should be in mission is stronger than the conviction that the other is in need of it? They hear that the Gospel is about loving God and one’s neighbor; they see religious traditions, including their own, contributing to conflicts and divisions in the world.

In other words, the enormity of the pastoral issues faced in interfaith relations and the lack of guidance to Christians on these issues within the formal teachings of the church struck me as a concern that must be addressed. An average Christian is hardly equipped, perhaps is ill-equipped, to live in a religiously plural world. Pastoral issues in interfaith relations needed to be discussed. It is this concern that led me to write the volume *Not without My Neighbour: Issues in Interfaith Relations*, which deals with such thorny issues as interfaith prayer, interfaith marriage, fundamentalism, mission and dialogue. Again, the widespread reception and the many translations of the book showed that it was responding to a felt need in the churches.

The long search

Interpreting the Bible for interfaith relations and addressing pastoral issues were important. But persistent and irreducible religious plurality, of which there was growing awareness among Christians, placed a far greater challenge on the church. It was clear that Christians would not be able to deal with religious plurality without rethinking some of the theological

foundations of the Christian faith. The first set of questions had to be on our understanding of mission: Why are we in mission? Is it based on the assumption that God is present in the lives of others or because God's presence can only be experienced in Christ? An African theologian asked: "Are we to believe that God was absent in Africa until the coming of the missionaries?" If God has a life with others, and others have a life with God, what are we after in mission; when is it accomplished? And how do we respond to parallel missions by other religious traditions, which also claim to arise as the result of revelations from God?

Such questions immediately take us to Christology—to the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ; to soteriology—to exploration of what it means to be "saved"; to pneumatology—to the work of the Spirit in the world and in lives of people. Here, the Sub-Unit on Dialogue, as part of the World Council of Churches, was in difficult territory. Dialogue itself was a controversial programme, and much of the reservations were based on the fear that it would compromise some of the essentials of the Christian faith in the interest of good relationships. How should one open up the theological issues?

The Dialogue Sub-Unit, which I headed, had an advisory working group, which was, at that time, moderated by Diana L. Eck of Harvard. We decided to take on the issue through a participatory process and called a group of persons to develop a nine-part study guide, *My Neighbour's Faith and Mine: Theological Discoveries through Interfaith Dialogue*, which sought to raise awareness among Christians of religious plurality and its challenge to Christian theology. The booklet, translated into 18 languages, was used by numerous study groups around the world. Their findings formed the basis of the first theology of religions conference organized by the WCC in Baar, near Zurich, Switzerland. The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue of the Roman Catholic Church collaborated in the event and brought to the meeting some of the theologians working on the issue within the Roman Catholic Church, including Paul Knitter and Jacques Dupuis. Several others within the Protestant and Orthodox traditions contributed to the thinking.

In the meantime, there was a general explosion of writings on the theology of religions. John Hick had provided the much-needed momentum to the process by proposing a "Copernican Revolution" in theology, which sought to bring God (the "Real"), instead of Christ or the

church, to the center. Paul Knitter's volume *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitude towards World Religions*, helped to provide an overall picture of the discussions in the history of the theological traditions of the church, with pointers for possible new directions of exploration. Within the Roman Catholic Church, several theologians began to push the boundaries of the theological openings provided in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Raimon Panikkar, Karl Rahner and many others began to explore the Roman Catholic theology of religions in new directions. In Asia, Stanley Samartha, Aloysius Pieris, Samuel Ryan, Michael Amaladoss and others were taking the reflections even further by doing theology in the context of other religions. Soon, considerable debate and a substantial amount of literature emerged, and many more theologians from all parts of the world, far too many to name here, joined the debate, each seeking to find new points of entry that would help the church to come to grips with the new challenge.

The threefold paradigm

It is difficult to know with any certainty who first proposed the much-used paradigm of Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism as a possible typology of Christian positions on theology of religions. There is no doubt, however, that Alan Race's book, *Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, was instrumental in popularizing it. The paradigm is still very much in use, despite the many voices that are critical of its limitations. What the threefold paradigm did was to throw into full relief what appeared to be clear theological alternatives one faced in understanding other religious traditions. It held a mirror, as it were, in front of theological approaches, so that one could gain a sense of the degree to which one had been able to take account of the religious life of one's neighbours in one's theological reflections.

Doctrinal points of entry

Different doctrinal points of entry became the other way in which positions in theology of religions were categorized and analyzed. The terms *theocentric*, *soteriocentric* and *pneumatocentric* have come into vogue, each showing how emphasis on one or other of the doctrines of the church would be more helpful in approaching the issue. Gavin D'Costa, Mark Heim and others have explored the Christian concept of the Trinity as a possible paradigm and entry point for understanding

religious plurality. These approaches helped in bringing a multiplicity of contributions to the discussion, and they even facilitated the furthering and expanding of specific Christian doctrines in new directions. Paul Knitter has brought these varied positions together in his *An Introduction to the Theologies of Religions*, which highlights the theological concerns and the points of entry that have informed the different approaches.

Teaching theology of religions

At the end of my tenure with the World Council of Churches I was invited to teach Ecumenical Theology at the Drew University Graduate and Theological Schools. Ecumenical theology deals with issues pertinent to the Ecumenical Movement. This means that I regularly offer a seminar course on “The Theology of Religions in the Ecumenical Movement,” bringing in contributions of the Conservative Evangelical, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, mainline Protestant, Pentecostal and other streams of contemporary Christianity to the discussion of other religious traditions. Positions of most scholars in the field of theology of religions are considered in the course of the semester. Students in the seminar present papers on the different perspectives and on significant scholars in the field; lively discussions follow. The field is new to most students, and the course opens new windows on their understanding of their own Christian tradition. The experience of leading this course, however, has drawn my attention to three issues:

The first has to do with the threefold paradigm of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Some have convincingly argued that these three types broadly define the possible options in theology of religions and that almost all positions can be shown to have opted for one or other of these positions (albeit with qualifications, even as Schubert Ogden, John B. Cobb Jr. and Griffin have done with John Hick’s pluralist perspective). The paradigm also provides a useful tool for getting at the definitive theological orientation of individual authors behind all their verbal and theological rhetoric.

The problem experienced in the class, however, is that the threefold typology presents too-stark alternatives. As a result, the class tends to polarize, with students feeling the need to defend, rather quickly, Clark H. Pinnock, Jacques Dupuis, John Hick, Paul Knitter, Aloysius Pieris, Raimon Panikkar, Amos Yong, Mark Heim or someone else that

appeared to correspond to where the student might eventually want to be in his or her own theological orientation. While the intellectual struggle it presented is welcome, the threefold paradigm appears to throw the students into the deep end before they have had the chance to ease into the deeper issues theologically and spiritually.

The second observation is that the different doctrinal points of entry, while methodologically innovative, do less than full justice to the Christian tradition as a whole. It is indeed true that beginning with God, the Holy Spirit, Salvation/Liberation, Trinity, or bringing one or the other of these to the center of the theological task does make a difference. It corrects some of the current imbalances in classical and confessional theological discussions. The problem, however, is that often one or other doctrine is overemphasized in the course of the discussion, bringing in new distortions. Doctrines that the students consider central to the Christian faith are either neglected or viewed only from a narrow lens provided by the single doctrine that had been chosen as the point of entry. My own sense, following the discussions in the seminars, is that these varieties of entry points help in expanding some of the neglected dimensions of specific doctrines and enable us to see the new potential they have for the task at hand. But they do not help us in a comprehensive Christian theological approach to the religious reality around us.

The third observation has been, for me, the most troubling. It has to do with what happens in my seminar on theology of religions in relation to the other classes offered on Christian theology in the Theological School. Drew is one of most progressive seminaries in the country, and students have the opportunity to learn from a great variety of theological streams: Classical, Confessional, Ecumenical, Philosophical, Wesleyan, Modern, Postmodern, Postcolonial, Feminist, Eco-Feminist and so on. The faculty represents the variety of theological perspectives today and is made up of persons from a number of cultures and traditions of the church. Students from all theological streams, confessions and from many regions in the U.S. and abroad are attracted to the school. The school is also committed to interdisciplinary learning. The professors who teach in the Theology and Philosophy stream (to which I belong) are well acquainted with the revolutions in the field of theology of religions. Even in the first-year course on “Outlines of Christian Theology” or “Systematic Theology” a session is devoted to the contemporary discussions on the theology

of religions and its challenge to Christian theology. There is no lack of awareness and no attempt to keep the issue on the sidelines.

Yet Christian theology, *as such*, has not yet been sufficiently rethought in light of religious plurality. We try to take account of plurality, we make adjustments in the presentation of the doctrines, and we have made accommodations through the introduction of courses on world religions and theology of religions as essential parts of the curriculum. But the gap between what we teach as the essentials of the Christian faith and what we struggle with in the course on theology of religions is yet to be bridged. In other words, we need to face the question whether theology of religions is simply a branch of theology or, instead, a theological exploration that challenges, informs, and shapes the whole way the church understands and explicates its faith in a religiously plural world.

My own conviction, growing out of teaching experience, is that the main function of a theology of religion is to affect the way we understand the Christian faith. Christian theology should not only take full account of the religious diversity of the world but also integrate it into its own self-expression, without distorting or undermining the self-understandings of others. The idea, of course, is by no means original. Decades ago Kenneth Cragg spoke of the need to do “Theology in Cross-Reference.” Wilfred Cantwell Smith argued that a Christian theological task, undertaken without awareness of what others believe, leaves out much of the data needed for the task. Awareness of the inadequacy of theology done with no reference to what others believe prompts Francis X. Clooney’s program on “Comparative Theology,” for instance, with its emphasis on intertextual readings, which he has been advocating for the past several years at the Catholic Theological Society of America. When exposed to the Asian religious reality, especially Buddhism, Paul Tillich came to the realization, unfortunately toward the end of his life, that he needed to re-do *Systematic Theology* in the light of religious plurality!

These attempts within the Western theological scene are, however, by no means unprecedented. From the time Christianity arrived in Asia with the colonial powers, many theological experiments have been undertaken by Asian theologians to understand their Christian faith in the light of other ways of believing. We also have similar theological responses in Africa, Latin America and in other parts of the world, but this rich history is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

Over the past few decades, however, there has emerged a more conscious struggle to find an adequate theology to support the Christian faith in a religiously plural world. John Hick, for instance, is quick to point out that his pluralist model would require rethinking of classical Christology. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, following up on his proposal that we need to have all the religious data necessary to do theology, invites us to see different religious traditions as “strands” of the “common religious history of humankind.” Based on this assumption, he speaks of the need for “World Theology,” a theology that deals with, and reflects on, the total religious experience of humankind. The world community, in his thinking, is ready for the emergence of a common theological framework.

Another very significant contribution that Smith made to the discussion was to clarify the nature of doctrines and theological statements, whether they are about God, Holy Spirit, Trinity or salvation. By making clear distinctions between “faith,” “belief,” and the “cumulative tradition” that gives a profile to a religious tradition, he brought in an awareness that doctrines and theologies, important as they are to religious communities’ efforts to articulate their faith, are nothing more than attempts to capture and speak about ultimate mysteries that cannot be fully expressed in human language. Greater awareness—and the humility that can arise from it—can help religious traditions to move closer to each other.

Toward a “Christian” theology of religions

John Hick and Wilfred Cantwell Smith have, in fact, had a great impact on me, as thinkers and as persons whom I had come personally to know and admire. They were courageous enough to go wherever their thinking took them. Many of us in the field owe a tremendous debt to them for pushing our thinking in new directions. My own attempt in this volume takes a few more steps to address the basic issue that they have identified. The question I seek to ask, and attempt to answer, is how we might re-understand and re-interpret the Christian faith, *as a whole*, for a religiously plural world.

This would be a difficult task, because Christians do not agree among themselves on the content and explication of their faith. We do not have a single “Christian theology” but “Christian theological traditions.” So the reader may rightly want to know *which* theology I am seeking to address.

The words *classical* and *traditional* would also not help us, because there are streams of interpretation within them that gave rise to the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant traditions. Any serious discussion of the Christian religious tradition today also cannot ignore the surge of Charismatic, Pentecostal and other forms of church expressions that do not necessarily pay attention to classical traditions of the church.

Further, the contemporary critical rethinking of almost every doctrinal formulation, the advent of contextual and regional theologies, and especially interpretations by women and other groups that had been kept at the margins of the theological task of the church make the task even harder. Postliberal, postmodern, and postcolonial thinking have put much pressure not only on theological doctrines but also the methods and assumptions of doing theology itself. Christianity itself is in transformation.

It is important that these difficulties not deter us from the task at hand. There is, after all, something like a “received theology” that is the expression of the faith of most of our congregations and of the preaching ministry. This “received theology” is being taught in most of our seminaries as “Outlines of Christian Theology” or “Systematic Theology.” There is a “received theology” at work in the missionary enterprise of the church. This theology is a mixture of the classical theological streams that led to the formulation of the Christian creeds and their subsequent interpretations, embellished by the confessional and cultural developments in Europe. In the Roman Catholic tradition many aspects of this theology have been affirmed as “doctrines” and “dogmas” of the church. In the Protestant tradition the Reformers and neo-orthodox theologians like Karl Barth have given form and content to it. Out of these have emerged some basic understandings about God, the significance of Christ and his death on the cross, the meaning of salvation, the nature and calling of the church, the missionary obligation and other realities that we present today as “Christian beliefs” both in the teaching and preaching ministries of the church and in interfaith contexts. While there are many variations and some vagueness about each of the doctrines that make up our articulations of the “Christian faith,” there are also strongly held characteristics that mark them out. What I hope to do is to highlight some of the basic “functioning beliefs” about the symbols of our faith and ask if they can be re-conceived today

to give us a basis for Christian theology in a religiously plural world and for an adequate theology of religions.

Why do we need such rethinking of the fundamentals of our faith?

Most of us agree that humankind has always been diverse and that its religious history will continue to exhibit irreducible plurality. Bringing all peoples under a single religious umbrella is neither possible nor desirable. It may still be possible and necessary to develop theoretical models to understand religious traditions within a common framework of meaning or to present them as part of the “common religious history” of humankind. But there is also the need for each religious tradition to make sense of its own tradition in light of religious plurality. The question for theology of religions, therefore, is *not only*, “What theological sense I can make of religious plurality?” *but also*, “What is the place of my own tradition, and how can I understand it within religious plurality?” The persistent plurality of religious traditions, therefore, raises three different sets of questions for each religious tradition:

- First, what is the attitude of the specific religion to plurality itself?
- Second, what is the nature of the relationship it seeks to establish with other religious traditions?
- Third, how does it account for and relate to religious plurality within its own self-understanding as a religious tradition?

While the three questions are closely interrelated, each of them point to a slightly different aspect of the overall issue, demanding different types of responses.

Many religious traditions are gaining a new awareness of religious plurality and are being challenged to respond to it. Until now, many of them have either been in geographical isolation or have been able to build theologically and socially self-contained communities that have lived unaffected by the plurality around them. The contemporary world exerts enormous pressures on such communities that make theological, social, and even spiritual isolation a difficult option. Some groups within these religious traditions refuse to deal with plurality because they still have the vision of bringing all peoples into their own fold; when this vision begins to appear utopian and religious diversity remains irreducible,

plurality itself becomes an issue to be dealt with. Today there are studies and volumes on religious plurality itself and its social, theological and political implications. Postmodern thinking on multiplicity, relativity, relationality, and hybridity has furthered this exploration.

The second challenge, the need to build relationships across the religious barriers, is being dealt with through interfaith dialogue and cooperation. This has been the easier issue to handle and has resulted in the rise of local, national, regional and international interfaith movements across the globe. Almost all religious traditions today acknowledge the need for interfaith dialogue. Some have argued this point by insisting that, “the only way to be religious in our day is to be interreligious.”

The third is essentially the theology of religions question. It is the challenge to all religious traditions to account for religious plurality—and the fact that others believe, pray, and have a spiritual history different from one’s own—from within their own worldviews and symbol systems. It is of course possible for any given religious tradition to ignore or refuse to consider the question, insisting that the question is irrelevant because the aim of their religious tradition is still to bring all peoples into their fold. Some others have responded to the problem by simply accommodating, however loosely, all other religions within their own symbol system. Still others have moved in the pluralist direction of accepting religious plurality as different responses to a common Ultimate Reality. Postmodern perspectives have led some to view religious traditions as alternate religious visions with different goals; they do not see the need to understand them in relation to a common Reality, or feel the challenge to account for them within their own religious self-understanding.

Pastoral dimensions of theological questions

There are, of course, arguments to support each of the above positions. My own interest, however, arises from my experience of dealing with congregations and students on issues of plurality and interreligious dialogue. The course on Interreligious Dialogue and the seminar on the theology of religions, invariably end with questions raised along these lines:

- If this plurality is true, what do we make of our Christian faith?
- Are we wrong to believe that God’s salvation is being offered to all people in Jesus Christ?

- If it is true that God is in a relationship to people of other religious traditions, and has revealed Godself in other ways, is there any case for Christian missions?
- Is it wrong to believe that the church is a community that has been “saved” by its faith in Jesus Christ in an “unsaved” world?

I realize that these are not the direct questions that scholars in the theology of religions deal with. But it is no secret that these are the ways in which Christians themselves pose the issues of Christian relationship to other religious traditions. In other words, while scholarship in the theology of religions deals in large-denomination currency notes, people look for answers in loose change, so that they become usable. The absence of reasonable answers to these questions has, in fact, shaken the confidence of the congregations much more than one realizes. On the extreme end, some have actually left the church and consider what was offered to them as the “Christian faith” as dogmatic, intolerant and bigoted. I have met several such “former Christians” who now call their religious status as “interfaith”—to indicate that they are now in an “open search” for a spirituality to sustain their lives. Others have begun to practice “double belonging”; they hang on to the Christian faith, inherited from their parents or to which they had turned to at one stage of their life, but now adopt yet another tradition like Buddhism or Hinduism as an additional spiritual home. Still others see a “conservative” or “fundamentalist” way of being Christian as the only way to be in the tradition; they consider the Christian faith of those in the “dialogue business” as simply nominal or formal, for they hold that it is difficult to be a true Christian and an interfaith person. “The interfaith movement,” said one of my students in the class, “leaves us in the dark; it takes away what we have, and leaves us with nothing to hold on to.”

The more I reflected on that comment, the more I was convinced that those of us in the field of interreligious dialogue and the theology of religions have much more work to do. This work has to do not only with finding appropriate models for a theological understanding of religious plurality but also with the interpretation of the Christian faith itself so that it would become a relevant faith in the context of religious plurality.

The Fourth Parliament of World's Religions

The Fourth Parliament of World's Religions met in Barcelona, Spain, July 7-13, 2004. It was a particular pleasure to me to be asked to be on a plenary panel on "Christian Responses for Religious Plurality." My heightened interest in this presentation had to do with the fact that the other two persons on the panel were Raimon Panikkar and Paul Knitter, whom I had known and admired for many years, and whose views are among the most often discussed in the classroom. I saw this also as an occasion to share my concern for an appropriate Christian response to religious plurality, which would help Christians in the pews to relate their faith to the new thinking that is emerging in the field.

The three of us took three dimensions of the question, and from the responses of the audience it was clear that they gelled together and showed the many facets of the issues involved. For my own part, I lifted up the need to "rethink" Christianity for religious plurality and expressed the conviction that a relevant Christian response to religious plurality in our day can come only when much of the classical Christian theology is also rethought. The situation facing the churches is nothing less dramatic than that faced by the early church when it moved into the Greco-Roman world. Luke, in Acts 15, says that the turmoil within the church was so profound, and the challenges that the Gentile Christians brought to the faith so crucial, that a special meeting of the leaders of the church had to be called in Jerusalem to deal with some of the beliefs and practices that were, at least by the Jerusalem assembly, expected of Gentiles who had joined the messianic movement. The movement was never the same.

"Our new awareness of religious plurality has shaken the very foundations of some of our theological formulations; the conscience of the church has been deeply troubled by the way some of its deepest beliefs have come under scrutiny," I argued at the Parliament. "What we need to do is to rethink some of our foundational beliefs, such as monotheism, salvation in Christ, mission and so on, for if we take religious plurality with the seriousness it deserves, nothing can be the same again. We are facing today issues of the dimensions faced by the early church in its meeting in Jerusalem."

“Yes, yes!” said Professor Panikkar, taking hold of me by my arm, “I also say that we need a Jerusalem-II.” Paul Knitter, seated at the other end of the table, concurred.

At the end of the session Paul came to me and asked—as he always does when he is excited about ideas—to write down the reflections I have had in my “long search” into a volume that would widen the discussion. All my books so far have come out of what I saw as a felt need in the churches. This, I hope, is no exception.

It is only after accepting the challenge that it dawned on me that the task is an enormous one. Christian doctrines have evolved over centuries under countless influences, and each doctrine has its own history. The greater problem has to do with the expression “*Christian*” *doctrines*, because, as mentioned earlier, there are several traditions that constitute the Christian Tradition and no amount of explanation would satisfy every branch of the church that their views have been sufficiently represented. The only way to resolve the problem was to decide not to be exhaustive but to say enough to highlight the issue in each area and to indicate possible new interpretations and approaches to it in the context of plurality.

It is important to indicate that this volume seeks to examine some of the most cherished beliefs in the Christian tradition and questions the adequacy of some doctrinal positions that are generally looked upon as “non-negotiable” aspects of what it means to profess a Christian faith. The intention, however, is not to be “radical” in the sense of being flippant or dismissive of what is central to our faith, but radical in the sense of going to the roots to examine whether there are resources that can help us rethink the concepts by which the faith of the church has been articulated in new and challenging ways. I have therefore attempted to give a brief background of the context and influences under which many of the Christian beliefs have developed, and have shown possible biblical and theological bases on which they can be *re-owned* in a new way.

The biggest challenge in any attempt to rethink Christian doctrinal concepts is the issue of Tradition itself. How far could one move away from the “traditions of the church” before one is judged to be speaking from the “outside”? Recognizing that today there is no dearth of theologians who do speak from the “outside,” and choose to do so for

reasons of their own, I hope that this volume will be seen as an “insider’s struggle” to make sense of the church’s faith in a religiously plural world. The intention is not to give answers but to begin a process of reflection. This volume, therefore, is only a pointer to work yet to be done by many others from a number of different perspectives. I fervently hope that it will be a catalyst to that process.