

A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

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Truth and Truth Claims

We live today in a world that is religiously and morally pluralistic. According to one recent reference book, religious pluralism is “the view that different or even contradictory, forms of religious belief and behaviour could or even should coexist. The problem with religious pluralism arises when one particular tradition (the mainstream) dominates society, denying the legitimacy of other streams and marginalizing them as sectarian phenomena.”¹

Stanley J. Samartha writes. “Pluralism does not relativize *Truth*. It relativizes different *responses* to Truth which are conditioned by history and culture. It rejects the claim of any particular response to be absolute.”² The acknowledgment that no one can hold the truth in the palm of his or her hand is the basic orientation of sound religious pluralism. Truth is not identical with our truth claims.

In a pluralistic world, those who embrace a particular position must be enlightened about positions other than their own. It takes critical intellectual effort to understand and appreciate the plural reality of truths and their meaningful co-existence. There are Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian, Jewish, Christian and Islamic religious experiences and expressions that inform respective truth perceptions. This challenges the conviction of “no other name” (Acts 4:12) which has guided Christian theology for centuries. It is a worthy and serious challenge.

Anyone who believes (*credo* - “I place my heart”) in Jesus Christ is Christian. There is, however, a bewildering plurality in the experience and expression of the Christian faith. This plurality is disturbingly numerous and can be dangerously divisive. For some Christians, miracles are essential, while for others they are not. For some, the doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible belongs to the core of the faith, while for others it is of little significance. For some, sacraments are at the centre of the faith experience, while for others (like the Christians of the Japanese Non-Church Movement) they are peripheral. For some, the papacy is an integral part of the faith, for others it represents a huge obstacle to the faith. The same scripture has been used for and against slavery, abortion and capital punishment.

Each denomination has its central confessional theme and its history - often defensive and closed to other traditions. The church itself is experienced and defined differently. Even the person of Jesus Christ is differently experienced and expressed. The 5th-century Chalcedonian definition created two families within the Orthodox Church.

From 1054 to 1965—more than nine centuries—(the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church of Constantinople remained in a state of unfriendly non-communication. In Asia and elsewhere, an inordinate amount of suspicion exists between “evangelicals” (conservative Christians) and “ecumenicals” (liberal Christians)—so much that one is tempted to say they belong to two different antagonistic religions. In fact the tensions inside Christianity are often more intense than the tensions we find in the inter-religious context. Not infrequently within one religion, one school denies another school the validity of its truth claim.

¹ R.J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1997, p. 537.

² S.J. Samartha, “The Holy Spirit and People of Other Faiths,” *The Ecumenical Review* vol. 42. nos. 3-4. Oct. 1990, p.253.

The basic reason for such often painful diversity within religious life is that the truth and our truth claims are not identical. Yet we mistakenly treat them as though they were identical. There will be always *some person or group of persons who* names any particular truth. No truth is untouched by humans. No truth, subjected to human language, is perfectly received or perfectly communicated. The biblical prophet's advice to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8) suggests that we should humbly recognize some distance between our naming of the truth and truth itself. This must also be the apostolic meaning of seeing the truth only "dimly" now (I Cor. 13:12).

Tillich's Warning

Among Christians today, pluralism has become a subject of serious concern, particularly in relation to human sexuality and the truth claims of other religions. Many fear that pluralism will erode God-given moral truth. If there are plurally truthful positions on moral issues, does that not cloud our moral judgment on what is right and what is wrong? Can a theological seminary admit students regardless of their sexual orientation? Can religions other than Christianity have saving truth? It is little wonder that such fears arise given the history of unchallenged Christian moral hegemony in the West for the last 16 centuries.

Often pluralism is discussed in terms of inclusivism and exclusivism. Exclusion and inclusion are central to religious discourse. "For many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt. 22:14). It is also basic to human experience. "Am I included or excluded?" is an ever-present existential question for all of us. Usually inclusion is more positively valued than exclusion. We like to be included in, not excluded from, salvation, be it eternal or temporal. Often inclusion and exclusion are understood in terms of the law of contradiction. To say that I am a Buddhist suggests the impossibility of my being a Muslim. If heterosexuality is right, then any approval or homosexuality must be excluded. If Christianity is the true religion then Islam cannot be a true religion (exclusion) In this context, pluralism appears as a third position, presumably over-coming the limitations of inclusion and exclusion. Truth includes. Truth excludes. Truth is plural.

There are within pluralism two different approaches to the nature of truth: (1) there are not one but many truths from the beginning ("hard pluralism"); (2) truth is one but it appears in many forms ("soft pluralism"). The difference between (1) and (2) is unclear because we cannot really grasp what "the truth" itself is. Pluralism must acknowledge (1) some common ground on which all humanity stands, without which any pluralism, inclusivism or exclusivism would be meaningless; (2) the fact that the same truth can appear in different religious traditions through their respective symbols and thought forms; and (3) whatever is said about pluralism, inclusivism and exclusivism, the religious life is one of commitment: Christians are Christians because they hold Christianity to be true, and so are Muslims, and so on.

In the context of (3) above, it is nearly inevitable that there would be conflicting claims to "ultimate truth." But when those claims are made, transcendence is domesticated and violated.

Theology is authentic and helpful when it acknowledges that our grasp of the truth is not identical with the ultimate truth itself. What is the ultimate truth of the Buddhist *dharma*, Islamic *shahada*, Jewish *shekhinah* or capital punishment, abortion, sexuality, race, nation, war-and-peace? We may have strong views on each of these. Are our strong views identical with ultimate truth? Paul Tillich makes us cautious:

Idolatry is the elevation of a preliminary *concern* to ultimacy. Something essentially conditioned is taken as unconditional, something essentially partial is boosted into universality, and something essentially finite is given infinite significance.³

We see the truth only "in part" now (1Cor. 13:9: cf 1 Cor. 4:5). In my own experience, I have seen Japan destroyed because "something essentially finite"—the Japanese imperial cult—"was given infinite significance". Truth grasps us, not the other way around. "You did not choose me but I chose you" (John 15:16).

Discredited by its involvement in slavery, inquisition, wars, racism and genocide, Christian civilization has lost what it perceived as its universal moral authority. In the eyes of humanity, it has failed to live by its own Golden Rule: "Do to

³ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1953, p. 16.

others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31; cf. ‘Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire,’ *The Analects of Confucius*, Book XII.2). In the mental map of humanity, there are a number of *oikoumenes* each respectively presenting its own perception of truth. The imperialism of one truth over another is not appreciated.

Is Buddhism a false religion? The answer would depend on to whom the question is addressed. And what do we mean by “false?” Again, the answer would vary widely. When and where are we asking questions of religious truth? Responses would differ widely. “The historical and the relative are identical,” wrote Ernst Troeltsch.⁴

There is no objectively valid absolute answer to the question regarding religious truth. The demand for absolute objective truth in religion is a move towards idolatry.

A Christian congregation that prays “Forgive us for neglecting your mercy as we condemn others who do not understand your gospel exactly as we do” expresses the spirit of the theology of pluralism. The prayer, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people” (Luke 18:11) turns its back on pluralism.

What Is the Gospel?

Christian discourse must stand upon the fundamental question: What is the gospel? The answer is *Jesus Christ*. “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (I Cor. 2:2), says Paul. This name is the core essential of the Christian life. “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (I Cor. 12:3). “For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven” (Matt. 16: 17). “Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church.”⁵ Not “I believe in the Nicene Creed,” but “I believe in Jesus Christ.” Peter heals “a man lame from birth” by invoking “the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth” (Acts 3:1-10). This name cannot be boxed up into a pluralistic or inclusivistic or exclusivistic scheme. Eduard Schweizer calls Jesus “the man who fits no formula.”⁶ One can only approach this name through the death and resurrection symbolized by baptism.

We who are *not* “full of grace and truth” cannot fully comprehend the one who is (John 1:14). Yet, the community of faith dares to confess and worship Jesus Christ. The content of theology is *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life*.⁷ The gospel is that the fullness of grace and truth come to us through the compassion of Jesus Christ, the depth of which is beyond our reach (Rom. 8:37-39), but which is illustrated by Jesus in his parable: “While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). This same quality of God is spoken of in the Old Testament. “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful (*raham*) and gracious (*hannun*), slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6; echoed in Num. 14:18; Joel 2:13; Pss. 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; I 45:8; Neh. 9:17; Jon. 4:2; Eph. 2:4; cf. Ps. 77:7-9). The Hebrew words *hanan*, *hesed* and *rahamim* (*rahamim* is from the word for ‘uterus’, *rehen*) are often translated by the English word “mercy.”

With Jesus compassion and forgiveness are united. When Peter asked him how many times should he forgive, the answer was “not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Matt. 18:21f.). This answer stands in the prophetic tradition: “He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea” (Mic. 7:19; see also Isa. 38:17; Jer. 31:34; - “I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more”). Jesus tells the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt. 18:23-35). in which we read: “And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.”

The entire ministry of Jesus demonstrates compassion-forgiveness. From the cross we hear: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Theology is not identical with Jesus Christ. Theology is a human construct. The doctrines of the Holy Trinity, of the two natures of Christ, of the holy eucharist and of the atonement— all of them—are nothing but our stammering about the “boundless riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:8). There are differing theological views on these central teachings of the Christian faith. To confer absoluteness on any theology is idolatrous. In fact we can make idolatrous use of the name of

⁴ Ernst Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religion*, London, SCM, 1972, p. 85.

⁵ Ignatius of Antioch, *Smyrnaeans* 8:2.

⁶ E. Schweizer, *Jesus*, London SCM 1971. pp 13-51

⁷ The title of Geoffrey Wainwright’s systematic theology, London, Epworth, 1980.

Jesus Christ of Nazareth (Matt. 7:21). It is important to remember that even our passion to criticize idolatry may itself become an idol.

Fullness not Absoluteness

“Fullness (*pleroma*) of grace and truth” does not mean “absoluteness of grace and truth.” “Fullness” is a hot biblical concept while “absoluteness” is a cold philosophical concept. The languages of nature-oriented cultures, such as the indigenous cultures of Asia, Africa and the Pacific, are more comfortable with concepts of fullness than of absoluteness. Nature does not cultivate the sense of the absolute. It does not appreciate moments of discontinuity. That which continues circles. Classically, the Upanishad describes circularity thus: “I, who am food, eat the eater of food” (*Taittiriya Upanishad* III,10.5). Circularity and plurality are akin. Plurality, placed in the flow of continual circularity, creates the psychological space needed for plural truths to co-exist.

The mystical speculation of Chinese Taoism and of Mediterranean neo-Platonism paints a metaphysically peaceful landscape between the one and the many—many proceeds from one, and many returns to one. In the historical world, however, we have been frequently exposed to the brutally concentrated political power of one, namely, absolutistic totalitarianism. My first 15 years were lived under the tyranny of one absolute divine emperor. It took the nation’s unconditional surrender in 1945 to taste the sweetness of many. “One” is more open to misuse than “many”, and when misused its potential for destruction can be catastrophic. This is so because “one” implies concentration. Mao Tse-tung said, “The heaven cannot have two sons.” Pope Boniface VIII said (in the bull *Unam Sanctam*, 1302), “At the time of the deluge there existed only one ark.” Often, the idolatry of many (polytheistic idolatry) is less harmful than the idolatry of one (monotheistic idolatry). In the confusions of human history “Many” may be more able to create peace than “One.”

Seeing a fanatic Japan reduced to a heap of ruins in the second world war, I learned that fanaticism must be rejected in favour of a commitment to universality. Unfortunately in our minds, universality tends to become imperialistic. Universality must be acquainted with multiversality. The words of the preamble to Japan’s post-war constitution—“We believe that no nation is responsible to itself alone, but that laws of political morality are universal”—suggest that a truly universal morality is imbued with a sense of responsibility to others.

Since 1945 *universality (and multiversality)* have been swallowed up by military-nuclear *dualism*. During this traumatic time, the false god of conflict dethroned the true God of universality and multiversality. Dualism is basically a conflictive scheme. Pluralism, on the other hand, can provide a demilitarized zone in which more than two realities can co-exist with a right amount of creative tension. The slogan of *Moloch*, the god of human sacrifice—“we are threatened by a mortal enemy”—was recited continuously by both superpowers, effectively destroying any sense of multiverse human community. George F Kennan writes of

a subconscious need on the part of a great many people for an external enemy—an enemy against whom frustrations could be vented, an enemy who could serve as a convenient target for the externalization of evil, an enemy in whose allegedly inhuman wickedness one could see the reflection of one’s own exceptional virtue.⁸

We need the “tax collector” against whom we can pray “God, I thank you that I am not like this tax collector” (Luke 18:11). Christian universality begins with the short prayer: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” It is this prayer that connects universality and multiversality.

Humanity is experiencing fatigue from the pressure of the absolute in history. Historically, the absolute is cold-blooded, violent and fanatic. “About three thousand of the people fell on that day,” says the famous episode of the Golden Calf (Ex. 32). This harsh report must be interpreted not as a divine intervention in the line of totalitarianism but as a consequence of the misuse of the fullness of divine grace and truth. Absolutism and totalitarianism are interchangeable evils that destroy the possibility of wholesomeness in human life, both spiritual and physical. Theology whether expressed in the schemes of pluralism, inclusivism or exclusivism, must safeguard itself from absolutism.

⁸ George F. Kennan, *The Nuclear Delusion*, New York, Pantheon, 1982, p. xxii.

People-centered Approach

Whether the world is defined pluralistically or otherwise, the *people* remain the primary reality for our theological thinking. Religion is embodied in people. The primary meaning of Islam is to be found in the Muslim person, not in the religion called Islam, though obviously there would be no Muslims without Islam. In the two-way traffic between the Muslim and Islam, I would give priority to the Muslim. It is for the sake of the Muslim that Islam exists, not the other way around (see Mark 2:27). People are not amazed by Christianity, but by the person Jesus Christ (Mark 4:41). Buddhism is in the Buddhist, a human person, who complains of toothache, but enjoys eating rice. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” says the Christian scripture. Christians may practise or they may not practise the commandment. In all its ambiguity, Christianity is in Christians.

Religion migrates as people migrate. Religions pick up and discard local languages and symbols as they travel. Any particular religious situation is inter-religious. Raimundo Panikkar writes: “Christianity is, sociologically speaking, certainly one religion; it is the ancient paganism or, to be more precise, the complex Hebrew-Hellenic-Greco-Latin-Celtic-Gothic_ modern religion *converted* to Christ more or less successfully.”⁹ There is no intact, sterilized, pure religion, not even Christianity. A religion expresses itself through plural symbols. Symbols are culture-conditioned. Some symbols are more meaningful than others.

I find Paul Tillich’s definition of religion in the passive voice significant: “Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern.” A faith statement is one that comes from a *person* who is in “the state of being grasped.” Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession says that “the church is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is preached in its purity.” “Purity” is not our own product. Rather, we are “grasped” by purity. To be “baptized” is to be grasped by the power of purification.¹⁰

Pluralism and Dialogue

Buddhists are not objects or targets of Christian evangelism. A theology of dialogue begins with an awareness of the dignity of the human person. “Buddhism” and “Christianity” cannot conduct dialogue:

- dialogue begins when people meet each other;
- dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust;
- dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community;
- dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness.¹¹

Dialogue that presupposes “mutual understanding and mutual trust” is the basis for pluralism. Theologies of dialogue and of pluralism, then, share the same foundation. Both are creatively open to bearing witness to Christ. In fact without “mutual respect” how can any Christian bear witness to Christ?

In dialogue we may share *common* personal experiences. We may then be led to find points of similarity among different religious traditions. Theological meditation on such points of similarity has often been discouraged; and in inter-religious situations it is the dissimilarities which tend to be emphasized. Beware, it is said: being interested in the similarities will lead you into syncretism. Christians fear that Christianity’s uniqueness will be eroded if there are points of similarity with other religious traditions. This perception is strange because it is a cardinal Christian teaching, given in the Jewish *Torah*, that God created all humans in the image of God. There is a common human experience, and that common experience is not to be feared.

⁹ R. Panikkar, “Christians and So-Called ‘Non-Christians,’” in Douglas J. Ellwood, ed., *What Asian Christians Are Thinking*, Quezon City, New Day, 1976, p. 361.

¹⁰ G. Wainwright, “Types of Spirituality,” in C. Jones, G. Wainwright and E. Yarnold, eds., *The Study of Spirituality*, London, SPCK, 1986.

¹¹ “*Can We Pray Together?*” London, British Council of Churches, 1983. p. 181.

Pluralism and Syncretism

Condemning syncretism is like condemning the air one breathes. Nothing in history is pure and isolated. For the human mind, there is no choice but to meet, converse and syncretize. What a vast reality of syncretism is Christianity in the United States! Japanese Buddhism and Indonesian Islam are syncretic. Religion and culture that do not engage in syncretic process are fossilized. Syncretism is a perennial life movement sponsored by both nature and culture.

In the context of Christian missiology, however, the word carries a negative connotation. Hendrik Kraemer called syncretism the “illegitimate mingling of different religious elements.”¹² The prophetic religion of biblical realism,” he wrote, must not be mingled with naturalistic and monistic religions.¹³ Nearly fifty years later, M. M. Thomas wrote, “Even various apprehensions of the totality of the world and life, i.e., religious and secular faith, need not be denied validity so long as they can be redefined or transformed in the light of the centrality of Christ.”¹⁴

Whatever we may say of other religions, they express “various apprehensions of the totality of the world and life.” Should we simply condemn and ignore these apprehensions? Why not “transform them in the light of the centrality of Christ?” Why not call this a theological programme of “Christ-centred syncretism?” The vision here is that “in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17). The centrality of Christ is not compromised. The one who is so completely excluded to the point of “even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8) is now the centre. Such “syncretism” is Christ-centred. This Christ-centred approach to syncretism is illuminating for the Christian. It will, however, be perceived as imperialistic by people of other faiths.

If there is power to “bring together” (*synstasis*), there is power to “break away” (*diastasis*). The history of religions, including that of Christianity, demonstrates these two contrasting movements. We live in the confluence of these two forces. One should not blame only syncretism and let separation go free. Separatism has not achieved the intended purity. I suspect that separatism has done more harm to the spiritual welfare of humanity than syncretism. Movements towards purity are frequently fraught with subtle arrogance. “I know what is pure!” The existence of a “Pure Gospel Church” will be the occasion for someone else to open a “Pure-Pure Gospel Church.”

People in the Pacific Islands are pleasantly confused (amused) when they compare the early missionaries’ dedication to eliminate “pagan culture” (*diastasis*) with their reversal today in trying to bring it back (*synstasis*). I concur with M. M. Thomas that a Christ-centred syncretism is theologically more meaningful than Christ-centred separatism. “In him all things hold together” has an eschatological dimension. It does not mean “anything goes.”

No Other Name

“In him all things hold together.”
How do we read this eschatologically?

And Jesus came and said to them. “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28: 18-20).

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12; cf John 14:6).

Matthew 28:18-20

¹² H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, London, Edinburgh House, 1937. p. 203.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 210.

¹⁴ M. M. Thomas, “The Absoluteness of Jesus Christ and Christ-centred Syncretism,” *The Ecumenical Review*, vol.37, no.4, Oct. 1985, p. 387.

That “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” does not mean that such authority is automatically given to Christians or to the church. The authority belongs to the Crucified and Risen One. The transfer of that authority to the church or to Christians is dangerously self-serving. The church or Christians can participate in this authority, but they cannot possess it. The only way to participate in this unusual (“scandalous,” I Cor. 1.23) authority of Jesus Christ is to take up our own crosses and follow him (Matt, 16:24). What this means is that the moment of evangelism is one of repentance (*metanoia*). This theological perspective is suggested by the ancient psalm: “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Ps. 51:17).

“Go, therefore” must not mean “Onward, Christian soldiers.” It does not suggest a mortal conflict between righteous Christendom and unrighteous heathendom. It does not encourage crusading imperialism. It does not imply a messianic complex on the part of the Christians. Rather, Christians are called to preach the gospel of compassion-forgiveness in the same way Christ preached, in the way of self-denial. It is the strangest way of going. Yet, it is the most educated way of going. True education opposes imperialism. Self-righteousness breeds imperialism. Reinhold Niebuhr writes, “There is no deeper pathos in the spiritual life of man than the cruelty of righteous people. If any one idea dominates the teachings of Jesus, it is his opposition to the self-righteousness of the righteous.”¹⁵

Acts 4:12

“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” How often this quotation has been misused to make the claim “I am inside!” and “You are outside!” Thus used, the verse fails to invite Christians to a deeper self-examination in the light of the gospel of compassion-forgiveness. Christians decide that they are always safely inside Noah’s Ark. Such no-urgency attitude de-eschatologizes Christian theology and spirituality. *Exclusion?* Taken literally, Acts 4:12 would exclude from salvation any human being who was born and died before the coming of Jesus Christ: Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah and so on. In the same vein, Confucius, the Buddha and Socrates would be excluded. People of great world faiths (Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, Confucians) and other religious traditions today would of course be excluded. Read in this way, the good “Name” which Peter proclaims excludes 3800 million people living today from salvation.

Christians have been taught to define truth by exclusion. The Council of Florence (1438-1445) said:

The Holy Roman Church firmly believes, professes and proclaims that none of those who are outside the Catholic church—not only pagans, but Jews also, heretics and schismatics—can have part in eternal life, but will go into eternal fire, “which was prepared for the devil and his angels,” unless they are gathered into that church before the end of life.

According to the Japanese Lutheran theologian Kazohi Kitamori, Jesus Christ is in pain in order to include those who are excluded.¹⁶ A Christian is one who acknowledges that he or she is not worthy to be “included.” Only with this sincere realization will we be rescued from the totalitarian ideology of exclusion.

Scare? Is it the intention of the “no other name” theology to scare people into salvation? In evangelism must Christians, out of love, mobilize every possible tactic, even the threat of damnation, to bring people to the Name? For millions of Christians the faith has been a means by which one escapes hell-fire. “Hell” is a religious symbol; it is not a place to go. This symbol—pointing to our rejection of God, not God’s rejection of us—indicates the seriousness of the choice between a we-centred and a God-centred life. (see Deut. 30:19; Man, 7:13).

Inclusion? Whether one is included or excluded depends upon where one stands. But how are we to know where we stand? Even Moses did not know where he stood until he was told (Ex. 3:5). Our understanding of ourselves is not so complete as we may think. The name of “no other name” is open to all, regardless of race, gender, age and religion. It

¹⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, New York, Seabury, 1935, p. 138.

¹⁶ Cf. K. Kitamori, *The Theology of the Pain of God*, Richmond, John Knox, 1965.

is the name that affirms all and includes all (I Cor. 13:4-7). It is the name which was in the beginning and will be in the end. Standing before this name we are to take off our shoes. We are standing upon the holy ground in which our conceptual schemes of exclusion *and* inclusion fail to function. The name is too strong and untamed to be continued by such schemes.

P/uralism? If Christians insist that Buddhist truth is nothing but deception. they do so at the price of reducing their own spiritual stature and credibility in the eyes of Buddhists. There is something inauthentic about establishing one's own superiority by depreciating others. The Second Vatican Council rightly rejected such a self-centred approach in its Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate* (1965). There the simple statement is: "For the church to which I belong. Christ is the truth." No more, no less. Confidently Christians can say "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions (*Nostra Aetate*, para. 2).

Love? There are those who protest, "If any religion can save, why do we have to believe in Christ?" This question betrays a capitalistic, profit-pursuing mindset, which makes all choices and decisions on the basis of profit. The implication is, "Why should we believe in Christ if that investment does not award us with a value-added dividend?" This is the rhetoric of calculation, not of love. I would rather interpret the statement of Peter as a love-word. He wanted to express the love he had towards Jesus, shaky and infirm as it was. He was captivated by this name. The idea that his words of personal devotion could produce a lifeless theology that excludes 3800 million people from salvation in Jesus' name was beyond his wildest dream. The Name of "no other name" is the name of the one who is full of compassion and forgiveness.

"In him all things hold together" is a confession of eschatological faith. This truth grasps us; we do not grasp it. It is in this passivity that Christ is actively named.

What Do You Read There?"

All stories and ideas presented in the Bible are intended to bring us to the presence of the compassionate-forgiving God in Jesus Christ so that our life may be transformed. Yet the reading of the Bible divides Christians. The question, "What do you read there?" (Luke 10:26) is of fundamental importance for Christian theology. Obviously, there are many ways to interpret the Bible.

"The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture" (a 1992 statement of the United Church of Canada) helpfully asserts: We do not hold that the word of God is identical to scripture's text. If this were so, then we would still be following exactly the dietary laws or the farming regulations of Leviticus and the prescriptions for church organization and order in the letters of Paul... Our challenge and our call, therefore, is to recognize in the biblical text the signposts which point us to the Living Word of God (p 23).

I agree fully with this. I also find the following suggestion helpful: in dealing with the deeds of Jesus, it is better to speak of the "sort of things Jesus did" rather than to claim that a particular narrative describes exactly what Jesus did at one particular time.¹⁷

The *so/a scriptura* of the Reformation does not mean the Bible can be read in isolation from what has happened and what is happening in the world. *So/a* does not refer to isolation but to a strong engagement. The more engaged we are in our confusing human history, the more powerfully the Bible will speak to us. If we are ignorant of the histories of the crusades, religious inquisition, slavery, colonization, genocide, racism and militarism, if we are not painfully acquainted with the histories of Native Americans, of the destruction of the European Jews, of Hiroshima and of Martin Luther King Jr., the Bible may come to us only superficially. The word of God comes to us "in many and varied ways" (Heb 1:1), such as the "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" written by Martin Luther King Jr. in 1963. The Eastern Orthodox church goes so far as to hold that the Bible is not the totality of God's word.

¹⁷ Cf. R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer and R. E. Murphy, eds., *The New Jerome Bible Commentary*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1990, p. 1318

The Bible engages in patient persuasion. It does not say, “Take it or leave it. This is it!” in its presentation of truth. It is decidedly far more interested in the compassionate-forgiving human relationship than in correct doctrine. Rudolph Featherstone, a Lutheran theologian in the US, has written: “Black suffering and the theology of the cross challenge orthodoxy to move beyond the posture of right doctrine and to become more concerned about orthopraxis.”¹⁸

Compassion compels us to interpret the Bible openly before the whole world. There should not be one interpretation for Christians (sheep) and another for the world (goats). When we engage in theological study, we must always keep the whole world—peoples of all religions, cultures, languages—in mind. We must know that two-thirds of the world’s population, who are not Christians, including Jews and Muslims, are listening when we say “no other name but Jesus Christ.” The excluded— 3800 million of them!—will not seek spiritual advice from those who have excluded them. Condemnation brings death to pastoral counseling.

The Bible is not a user-friendly reference book listing what is good and what is wrong. Two Christians who study the Bible sincerely and seriously can come out with quite opposite views. “Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other,” said US President Abraham Lincoln in his Second Inaugural Address (1865). The greatness of the Bible is not that the Bible is literally the word of God, but that God is able to speak to us and come to us even through the confusion of human language. The Eastern Orthodox church understands that the biblical authors display their own human shortcomings and specific intellectual limitations. They speak from the limited perspective of their time. The Bible does not authenticate itself. It is God speaking through the Bible that authenticates it. When this happens, the Bible is “baptized”—it has gone through death and resurrection in our interpretation of it.

Christian Life

Jesus Christ offers unconditional compassion-forgiveness. The unconditional is, however, outside our human experience. Perhaps the word “unconditional” should be replaced by “abundant” and “generous.” In the parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16) we read the idiomatic line: “Are you envious because I am generous?” God’s generosity creates a stumbling block. We know how to live with stinginess, but we are confused by such a vast generosity.

A theology of the generosity of God has been demonstrated in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the Republic of South Africa. Though the black majority population had lived so long under the cruel injustice of the white apartheid policy, in seeking its spiritual integrity the post-apartheid nation rejected the way of retaliation. God’s compassion-forgiveness is foundational to human spirituality and morality, and even to international relationships. Donald Shriver writes, “Forgiveness in a political context, then, is an act that joins moral truth, forbearance, empathy, and commitment to repair a fractured human relation.”¹⁹

While it is true that the ethic of the kingdom of God cannot be directly applied to the “kingdoms of this world,” these two kingdoms are in some way related. If there is no relationship, what is the value of proclaiming the kingdom of God at all? (Luke 4:16-19). What does the coming into this world of Jesus Christ mean if there is no vital relationship between these two “kingdoms?” What else do the death and resurrection of Jesus mean? As Mother Teresa of Calcutta said in an interview in 1974: “I see God in every human being. When I wash the leper’s wounds, I feel I am nursing the Lord himself.”

It is the responsibility and privilege of the Christian in this pluralistic world to live intelligently and faithfully in accord with the petition which the church recites in its service of worship: “forgive us as we forgive others.” In this worship we may experience the power of baptismal transformation.

¹⁸ In Albert Pero and Ambrose Moyo, eds., *Theology and the Black Experience*, Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1988, p.54.

¹⁹ D Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies*, New York, Oxford UP, 1995, p.9.