

The *Real* and the Trinitarian God

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Both his supporters and his critics agree that John Hick has been one of the most creative and influential proponents of what over the past half century, and again in this book, has come to be known as a pluralistic theology of religions. For many, *pluralism* and *Hick* are almost synonyms. But Hick has been as controversial as he has been influential. For many Christians his “Copernican revolution,” or his bold foray “across the Rubicon” from inclusivism to pluralism, has left them rather disconcerted, to say the least. Theologically, Christians wonder if Hick’s understanding of pluralism does justice to the integrity of their own faith; philosophically, they ask whether Hick’s revolution does justice to the integrity of other faiths.

So in this essay, which represents my own efforts to elaborate a Christian response to religious pluralism, I begin with John Hick. Pivotal in his pluralistic theology is his notion of the Absolute as “the Real.” In what follows, I set forth how a trinitarian understanding of God can provide the framework for a theology of religions that is both genuinely open to other religions (and therefore pluralist) but also faithful to Christian tradition (and therefore inclusive).

JOHN HICK’S CONCEPT OF THE REAL

John Hick’s work in the area of theology of religions shows a shift in the mid-1980s.¹ In the earlier phase of his efforts toward a new theology of

¹ This became clear in John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (London: Macmillan, 1985; 7th ed. London: Macmillan, 1994) and was elaborated then in his main work, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

religions—now termed the pluralistic approach²—he called for a “Copernican” turn in the Christian understanding of other religions. In the place of traditional ecclesiocentrism and christocentrism Hick proposed a theocentrism in which God is seen as the center within the cosmos of religions. As part of the shift in Hick’s approach, his proposal was not only grounded in detailed analyses in the philosophy of religion (and the history of religions) but was expanded significantly in content and foundation. Hick introduced the “neutral” notion of “the Real,” a nontraditional term with which he wanted to include theistic personal concepts of God as well as non-personal viewpoints. All personal connotations, he argued, could be attributed no longer to the “Real-in-itself” but only to a specific concept of the Real.

There was no mention of a communication with Ultimate Reality or of its self-communication (revelation), for this would assume a personal center within this reality, and it would contradict its trans-personal character. For Hick, under no circumstances can personal and non-personal concepts of the Ultimate Reality be understood as manifestations of its self-revelation. Such concepts are merely human-religious images and descriptions. Even the notion of personality is merely a human concept. Therefore, the question of whether in the inner being of “Ultimate Reality” we are dealing with a personal or an impersonal entity is in the last analysis not only unanswerable but meaningless. At best, we can reach formal, analytically true sentences, independent of experience—such as Anselm’s when he spoke of God as “*id quo maius cogitari non potest*” (God is that reality greater than which we cannot think). Hick does recognize that we must attribute to the Real-in-itself at least two characteristics: the affirmation of its existence (albeit in fundamental distinction from all human forms and concepts of existence), and “the property of ‘being able to be referred to.’”³ To this the notion of unity can be added.⁴

With these determinants—as in general in speaking of the Real-in-itself—one is dealing with theological-philosophical assumptions that arise from reflecting upon foundational experiences of the Transcendent—experiences that are constitutive of the great religious traditions of humankind. No “objective” statements are possible about the Ultimate Reality in itself. It is ineffable.

It is precisely here that we touch the problem in Hick’s approach: all possible statements about the Real-in-itself are, according to Hick, only qualifiers of a postulate. But the religions themselves, in making their statements and claims, do not consider these claims to be merely postulates, for they feel

² So termed since *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religions* (London: Macmillan, 1973; 5th ed. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1993).

³ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 239.

⁴ See Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 248–49: “The Real, then, is the Ultimate Reality, not one among others; and yet it cannot literally be numbered: it is the unique One without a second” (249); see also John Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths: Critical Dialogues on Religious Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1995), 69ff.

they are saying something real about the Real. Evidently, what Hick is operating with is a way of seeing or knowing that is “above” the actual, existing religions.

Perhaps we can get at this problem with reference to epistemology and ontology.

Epistemologically: Because of the ineffability of Ultimate Reality—an ineffability that does not even allow analogous language—we cannot, according to Hick, ascribe attributes to Ultimate Reality—certainly not personal attributes such as love, grace, and righteousness, which are of central importance to a Christian understanding of God. Such talk would be an offense to the Infinite, whose distance from us does not permit any kind of descriptive language.

On the other hand, Hick postulates that the Real is *authentically* available to and through the various religions. This means that its essence and, what is more, its soteriological or transformative power, can be felt and understood with some clarity, although always in fragmentary and inadequate forms that are conditioned and so limited by cultural-historical forms of perception. All knowledge of the Infinite is perspectival, which means appropriate to the context but always limited.

Ontologically: The same problems that appear in the epistemological tension between ineffability and the limited perspectives that the religions have of the Real are present in the ontological polarity of immanence and transcendence: The heavy emphasis on the inalienable transcendence of the Real leads to a devaluing of its immanence in history and in the religions. The language and rituals of the religions cannot be considered to be real symbols of Ultimate Reality; they are only conceptual “signs.”

And yet, Hick is not saying that the Transcendent is utterly absent in the immanent. Leading to what might look like pantheism, he affirms the ubiquity of Ultimate Reality, always adding, immediately, that this immanence can in no way be spoken of “objectively.” The immanence of the Ultimate hovers numinously within, and yet out of reach of, all the phenomenal forms the religions give it with their differing cultural conditionings. Hick is speaking about a *mediated* immanence of a reality that in the final analysis lies beyond all mediations. What is most problematic in all this is whether it is really possible to claim authenticity for any religious concept or symbol. Since the Reality to which these forms point lies shrouded in indeterminacy, the only way left to claim any authenticity for religious forms is the pragmatic criterion of what Hick calls their soteriological potential: how much they promote the well-being of humanity and the earth.

The problems we have pointed out with Hick’s notion of the Real can also be found, to lesser or greater extent, in all theological positions that try to logically think through affirmations of the infinity, incomprehensibility, and transcendence of God. How are we to avoid such problems and still hold to the utter mystery of the Divine?

I suggest that the doctrine of the Trinity can be an effective aid. In the contemporary discussion on a Christian theology of religions, the Trinity has

recently been presented as an effective framework for working out a coherent theology of religions.⁵ The doctrine of the Trinity, it is claimed, can balance and mediate the tension between the poles of divine transcendence and immanence, God's hiddenness and revelation.

But before I lay out my trinitarian proposal, another complex but important question must be taken up; that is, in making use of a specifically Christian doctrine as the framework for a universal theology of religions, don't we inescapably fall back into either an exclusivistic or an inclusivistic approach to other religious traditions?

GLOBAL THEOLOGY AND MUTUAL INCLUSIVISM

Any viable theology of religions must take place on two levels: on the *intra-religious* level, where one explores the relation between one's own religion and other religions, and on the *meta-religious* level, where one seeks to understand the variety of religions from the perspective of the philosophy of religion.

THE INTRA-RELIGIOUS LEVEL

On the intra-religious level one proceeds from one's own tradition and attempts to understand and interpret the world of other religions according to the beliefs and perspectives of that tradition. Such a procedure is clearly a self-conscious inclusivism, but it need not make any claims for the superiority of one's own religion. Instead, it can proceed as an "inclusivism

⁵ See the works of Raimon Panikkar, beginning with *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973); the contributions of Rowan Williams, Gavin D'Costa, and Christoph Schwöbel in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 3–15, 16–29, 30–46; Carl E. Braaten, "Christocentric Trinitarianism vs. Unitarian Theocentrism," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 24 (1987): 17–21; Francis X. D'Sa, *Gott der Dreieine und der All-Ganze* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1987); M. D. Bryant, "Interfaith Encounter and Dialogue in the Trinitarian Perspective," in *Christianity and the Wider Ecumenism*, ed. Peter C. Phan (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 3–20; Anthony Kelly, *The Trinity of Love: A Theology of the Christian God* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989), 228–48; Luco. J. van den Brom, "God, Gödel and Trinity," in *Christian Faith and Philosophical Theology: Essays in Honour of Vincent Brummer*, ed. Gijsbert van den Brink et al. (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1992), 56–75; Ninian Smart and Steven Konstantine, *Christian Systematic Theology in a World Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 149–99, 439–45; S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995); Michael von Brück, *Einheit der Wirklichkeit: Gott, Gotteserfahrung und Meditation im hinduistisch-christlichen Dialog* (München: Kaiser, 1986).

of mutuality,”⁶ a position that Hick recognizes as close to his own pluralistic model.⁷

The limitations of such a “mutually inclusivist” position are apparent: Despite its genuine openness to dialogue, it remains bound to the internal beliefs and perspectives of its own religious tradition. For this approach, there is no “higher” point of view. Ultimate Reality is understood as the God or as the Absolute that is experienced and conceptualized in the normative revelation of one’s own religion. This is so despite the conscious recognition that such experience and concepts are socially constructed within one’s own tradition. This approach can recognize that the Divine is truly grasped in other religions only as long as this does not negate the truth-claims of one’s own tradition. Such a negation would occur if members of the religious tradition are told that all their truth-claims are only “postulates” that do not really disclose the reality of the Ultimate. Religious faith lives from the assurance that in the faith experience, no matter how much that experience is “socially conditioned,” one is knowing and asserting something real and true about the Ultimate—not merely something that *appears* to be true. Religious experience, or faith, in all the religious traditions, operates out of these same presuppositions.

Religious experience, therefore, presupposes a very real and active point of reference or source for that experience; this source, in whatever manner, communicates itself (as distinct from an Aristotelian concept of God that Hick seems to suggest). For such communication to take place, it is not necessary to invoke the analogy of human self-communication; such communication can conceivably also take place from an impersonal, spiritual power that can radiate and make itself present without necessarily being experienced as a “self.” For faith or religious experience, what is important is that there be an authentic disclosure of a *real* reality; religion cannot be based on the mere product of human religious consciousness. We can speak of authentic disclosure of the Divine Ground of Being only if it is clear that it owes its presence to itself. It seems to me that this is true not only for theistic God-experiences but also for enlightenment-experiences of Buddhism. For such non-theistic traditions as Buddhism, what matters most is not just the spiritual

⁶ See Reinhold Bernhardt, *Der Absolutheitsanspruch des Christentums: Von der Aufklärung bis zur pluralistischen Religionstheologie*, 2nd ed. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 1993), 236–39; and Bernhardt, “Philosophische Pluralismuskonzepte und ihre religionstheologische Rezeption,” in *Wege der Theologie ins dritte Jahrtausend*, ed. Günter Riße, Heino Sonnemans, Burkhard Theß (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 1996), 461–80. Michael von Brück describes that model as a “reciprocal inclusivism” (see his “Heil und Heilswege im Hinduismus und Pluralismus—eine Herausforderung für christliches Erlösungsverständnis,” in *Der einzige Weg zum Heil? Die Herausforderung des christlichen Absolutheitsanspruches durch pluralistische Religionstheologien*, *Quaestiones Disputatae* 143, ed. Michael von Brück and Jürgen Werbick [Freiburg: Herder, 1993], 62–106, 88).

⁷ Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, 23.

achievement of the practitioner who meditates and to whom the breakthrough to the Nirvana is opened; rather, what is experienced is the self-presentation of Nirvana, which is a transcendental reality, not merely a state of consciousness.⁸

Such loyalty to one's own tradition and its basic convictions does not require one to hold up one's own religion as absolute or as having an exclusive claim to truth. If one continuously recognizes, as part of one's own tradition, that the Divine Ground of Being is universal and infinite, and if at the same time one is aware of the perspectival character of all one's religious perceptions, then it is impossible to make absolute claims for one's religion. Indeed, one will recognize that any religious community will come to deeper understandings of its own beliefs through interreligious dialogue and through wrestling with the issues of a theology of religions.

In the final analysis, the many religions and cultures of the world will always stand next to one another in their manyness; they will not be able to fashion or transform their plurality into a higher unity. There is no preestablished ground of unity existing before or outside of all of them. Therefore, in a certain sense, there can only be a "Ptolemaic" dialogue between the religions—that is, a struggle for the truth; they will never break through to a Copernican center that will overcome their diversity. The plurality of religious perspectives will not be dissolved into a higher monism; in this sense, the religions are incommensurable to each other.

Admittedly, such pluralism, without the postulate of a final unity, is in danger of sliding into relativism. This danger, however, need not become reality; there are ways to protect against this slide, for all the religious traditions offer universal norms for testing the authenticity of religious claims. Such universal norms proclaimed by particular religions can be brought into dialogue with each other.

THE META-RELIGIOUS LEVEL

An excessive focus on one's own religion is avoided with the help of a philosophy of religion that seeks an understanding of religions that goes beyond but embraces each individual religion. Such efforts move beyond the intra-religious perspective of "mutual inclusivism" and enter the meta-religious level. Here John Hick's "pluralistic theology of religion" finds voice.

Hick's project, which defines itself as "a second order philosophical theory or hypothesis" or as a "meta-theory about the relation between the historical religions," is not necessarily at odds with a "mutually inclusivistic" approach for which the point of departure is the central affirmation of the faith of one's tradition (which Hick calls "a first-order religious creed or gospel,"

⁸ See Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Buddha and Christ as Mediators of Salvific Transcendent Reality," in *Wandel zwischen den Welten* (Festschrift for Johannes Laube), ed. Hannelore Eisenhofer-Halim (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2003), 647–67, esp. 651ff.

or “a self-committing affirmation of faith”⁹)—as long as the mutual inclusivists renounce any kind of exclusivism or superior inclusivism.

So, I would like to suggest:

- That we do not consider these two approaches to a theology of religions as opponents, but rather that we view them as a polarity, the poles of which are located on different levels.
- That in this polarity between philosophical meta-theories and theological interpretations of interreligious relations, we first seek to understand the presence of the Divine in the revelations of other religions from the viewpoint of our own truth-claims; then we can use the perspectives of each religion as bridgeheads to formulating philosophical meta-theories of religious pluralism.

In Christian efforts to do this, the doctrine of the Trinity can serve us well. But to show how that might be possible, we first have to clarify just what Christians can or should affirm when they speak about God as triune.

PAUL TILlich'S TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY AND A THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

According to Paul Knitter, many of the current efforts to work out a theology of religions based on the Holy Spirit (pneumatology) and the Trinity end up in a form of christocentrism insofar as they subordinate the work of the Spirit to the Logos.¹⁰ Knitter obviously is speaking of the Logos in terms of its particular incarnation in the historical figure of Jesus Christ.

In what follows I suggest that the trinitarian theology of Paul Tillich can help us avoid this subordinationist tendency in understanding the Trinity and especially in using trinitarian perspectives to formulate a theology of religions. I believe that Tillich's understanding of the Trinity lays the general foundation for a theology of religions and helps us build on it. As is well known, Tillich frequently reformulated his views of other religions; one of the main impulses to do so came through his dialogue with Shin'ichi Hisamatsu (1957) and his journey to Japan (1960).¹¹

Tillich distinguished between the specific Christian doctrine of the Trinity and general trinitarian principles or perspectives.¹² The Christian doctrine of

⁹ John Hick, “The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Reply to Gavin D’Costa,” *Religious Studies* 33, no. 2 (1997): 161–66.

¹⁰ Paul F. Knitter, “A New Pentecost? A Pneumatological Theology of Religions,” *Current Dialogue* (January 1991), 32–41.

¹¹ See Dirk Chr. Siedler, *Paul Tillichs Beiträge zu einer Theologie der Religionen: Eine Untersuchung seines religionsphilosophischen, religionswissenschaftlichen und theologischen Beitrags*, Theologie Bd. 21 (Münster: LIT-Verlag, 1999), 178ff.

¹² Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vols. 1–3 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1951–63), 1:249–52, 2:143.

the Trinity is the product of a certain constellation of theological problems in the history of the early church. The relation between God and the Logos present in Jesus of Nazareth had to be clarified. This was achieved first by the elaboration of a binitarian, then of a trinitarian symbolism. Thereby Christians became aware of what we can call a trinitarian perspective that reached far beyond the doctrine of the Trinity itself; it became a perspective for understanding human existence, the relationship between God and humankind, and the God-experience itself. Tillich, therefore, could state that trinitarian symbols provide “insight into the ‘depth of the Godhead.’”¹³

This insight, according to Tillich, grows out of three experiences, the first and the second of which clearly go beyond specific Christian experiences of God, and indeed, well beyond the problems that led the early church to formulate its trinitarian beliefs.¹⁴

1. For Tillich, every grasp of the Divine is characterized by a “tension between the absolute and the concrete elements in that which is of ultimate concern to us”—that is, between the unconditionality of the Unconditional and its manifestations in God-mediators (note the plural!), or between God as ground/abyss and God as form/self-manifestation. Here again we encounter the polarity between transcendence and immanence, between the Divine in its unfathomable mystery and the Divine in its revealed forms. These forms are essential, for only if the Divine is concretized in historical forms and figures can we encounter it. Yet each of these finite figures is only a *manifestation* of the Infinite. Therefore, Tillich reasoned, there must be a pole within the Godhead that can represent itself within the finite without losing itself in the finite.
2. Whenever the Divine Ground of Being is grasped as a living ground, it has to be understood according to the fundamental dynamics of life. The basic movement of life, however, consists of the dialectical process between identity, nonidentity (difference), and reintegration. The philosophy of German Idealism related this dynamic principle of all life (being-by-itself, proceeding-from-itself, and returning-to-itself) to the inner dynamics of the Divine Ground of Being.
3. Three different revelatory experiences require some kind of interrelatedness: God experienced as creative power, as manifest in Jesus the Christ (that is, as saving love), and as the ecstatic elevation of the human spirit to unambiguous life. These different God-experiences offer answers to fundamental existential questions: about the finiteness of life, about estrangement within life, and about the ambiguity of life. Such questions appear in all religions and cultures.

¹³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:283: “The trinitarian symbols are a religious discovery which had to be made, formulated, and defended.”

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:283ff.; see also 1:228.

In this way, Tillich sees the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as a mirror reflecting the broader existential-ontological aspects of human existence. This general-ontological trinitarian structure finds its expression in the specific Christian conviction that the absolute universal Logos is represented in Jesus Christ. He manifests God's self-mediation in history.

For Tillich, a trinitarian perspective reaches far beyond Christianity and offers us a plausible understanding of "the unity in the manifoldness of divine self-manifestations,"¹⁵ or it enables us "to express in embracing symbols the self-manifestation of the Divine life to man."¹⁶ The *personae* of the Trinity are real-symbolic manifestations of the unconditioned One.

The christocentrism that is still present in this understanding of the Trinity is not a Jesus-centrism; rather, it gravitates around the universal Logos in whom the incomprehensible Divine Ground communicates itself. This self-communication has become concrete in Jesus as the Christ without being confined to just this concretization. Tillich clearly distinguishes between the Logos as the self-expression/self-alienation of God and its historical manifestation in Jesus of Nazareth.

Just as Christian trinitarian teaching is imbedded in broader trinitarian thought, christocentrism is surrounded by the universality of the Spirit of God. Pan-Chiu Lai rightly affirms: "While Christology as entry point of the doctrine of the Trinity is at the level of Christian doctrine, pneumatology as the foundation of the doctrine of the Trinity is at the level of the trinitarian principle. Perhaps we may say that Christ is the center of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity in an epistemological sense, whereas the Spirit is in an ontological sense the starting point or center of the trinitarian principle."¹⁷

In as much as God's self-manifestation in Jesus as the Christ requires a specifically Christian doctrine of the Trinity, it is God's self-communication in history in general (specifically in the history of religions) that calls for the general trinitarian symbolism. With such a trinitarian perspective, the Christian's vision is widened and better able to perceive God's revealing presence in other religions.¹⁸ The manifestation of the universal Logos in Jesus as the Christ represents for Christian tradition the initial and normative context for detecting and relating to the trans-religious and trans-cultural working of God's Spirit.

If one wants to call Tillich's theology of religions inclusivistic, it can only be in a *hermeneutically* inclusive sense. A Christ-centered understanding of God can serve Christians as their normative epistemological starting point

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3:293.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:294.

¹⁷ Pan-Chiu Lai, *Towards a Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 153.

¹⁸ What Tillich had to say about other "worlds" can be applied to non-Christian religions: "The God who is seen and adored in trinitarian symbolism has [by its self-communication in the Logos] not lost his freedom to manifest himself for other worlds in other ways" (*Systematic Theology*, 3:290).

and focus without any claims that this understanding exhaustively embraces all of God's—or Being itself's—revelation throughout the universe. The revelatory outreach of the Spirit is broader than the history of God's revelation in the incarnation of the Logos. The activity of the Spirit serves, as it were, as “the field of force” that from the beginning of time has been creatively at work in the cosmos. In this same field Jesus himself lived and found inspiration, but he certainly does not limit or exhaust this Spirit-field. The activity of the Spirit can thus have for Christians a normative representation in Christ that does not exclude but rather relationally includes other representations. If we understand God's incarnation in Jesus in this way, it does not lead to exclusivism.

Tillich did not fully develop his trinitarian framework for a theology of religions. Still, one can note how much the ingredients and concerns of this approach reflect John Hick's theology of religions. The emphasis on the infinity, universality, and ultimate incomprehensibility of the Divine Ground of Being that characterizes Hick's concept of the Real had already been advocated by Tillich. In Protestantism, according to Tillich, the unfathomable mystery of God had lost out to the Christian stress on the self-limitation of God in Jesus Christ.¹⁹ John Hick's emphatic insistence on the incomprehensibility of the Divine Ground of Being can be seen as an effort to readjust this imbalance; it is certainly in line with Tillich's description of Being itself as unfathomable ground and abyss. But Tillich—more vigorously than Hick—counterbalances this emphasis on the ineffability of Ultimate Reality with a sound recognition of divine revelation, and he uses a trinitarian perspective to relate both poles. Therefore, he does not have to describe the relation between God-in-Godself and God-for-us in terms of a sequence. The God-for-us *is* the self-communication of the God-in-Godself, for it is the very essence or nature of God to communicate and reveal God's self.

Tillich's diagnosis of Protestantism stands in need of clarification and qualification. Different from Luther's emphasis on the self-communication of God in Jesus Christ, Zwingli stresses the universal working of God's Spirit and thereby offers a helpful and engaging avenue for a pneumatological theology of religions. Zwingli's “spiritualism” is theocentric, that is, oriented toward the Godhead in trinitarian terms. God's Spirit is not merely the mediator of the salvific truth opened up by Christ; rather, the Spirit serves as the active source of all truth, as well as of divine providence, in both its individual and historical agency.²⁰ It is not accurate, therefore, to present the whole of Protestantism as totally christocentric.

¹⁹ Ibid., 3:291.

²⁰ Emil Egil et al., eds., *Huldreich Zwinglis sämtliche Werke* (Leipzig: Verlag von M. Heinsius), vol. 2 (1908), 172, 17ff.; vol. 3 (1914), 124, 15f.; vol. 9 (1925), 458, 25ff. Cf. Rudolf Pfister, *Die Seligkeit erwählter Heiden bei Zwingli: eine Untersuchung zu seiner Theologie* (Zollikon/Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1952).

A TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

We can now draw some conclusions. A trinitarian framework for a Christian theology of religions can preserve the concerns of theocentric, christocentric, and spirit-centered theologies, as well as coordinate and modify those concerns.

THEOCENTRIC: THE GOD BEYOND GOD

A trinitarian approach to a theology of religions maintains the fundamental difference between the Divine Ground of Being and all finite beings. Ontologically, this difference preserves the categorical distinction between the Absolute-in-itself and all its historical manifestations. Epistemologically, this difference implies the ultimate unavailability of the Divine to all religious perceptions; that is, in all its genuine revelations, the Divine remains inexhaustible mystery. So, the vigor of the Second Commandment remains. So does the distinction between the economic and the immanent Trinity, or between God's relation to the world and God-in-Godself. Ultimate Mystery remains; God is not dissolved or captured in the divine self-communications, least of all in religious concepts of God. Therefore, the apparent theological alternatives between theistic and non-theistic conceptions are ultimately relative. This recognition of the ultimate mystery of the divine Being transcends any theistic theocentrism and calls us to embrace the apophatic dimension in all religions, especially in those religions of a mystical orientation or in the Buddhist experience of Nirvana and *shunyata*.

Such a recognition of the infinity and universality of the Divine Ground of Being, together with the perspectival character of all religious perceptions, is basic not only for a pluralistic theology of religions but for all God-talk that takes seriously the difference between theological language and the reality of the *Deus semper maior* (the ever-greater God, or Paul Tillich's "the God beyond God"²¹). Such a recognition is not simply the demand of a postmodern relativism; rather, it is the mark of any genuine spirituality open to transcendence and aware of being constituted in a reality beyond itself—that is, aware that its *Gestalten* are not identical with Ultimate Reality but directed toward it.

We must bear in mind, furthermore, that if such a "negative theology" is overemphasized, then any talk about Ultimate Reality becomes impossible. Impossible also would be any relationship with the Divine, or any access to it, for in a totally negative theology, the Ultimate is not an "end" that can be attained or a point from which one can be addressed. Rather, it is the numinous Ground/Abyss, in the face of which all one can do is keep silent. Such an

²¹ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1952), final chapter.

understanding of the Divine dissolves into a realm of non-definition; it becomes what Luther called “the naked Absolute.”

CHRISTOCENTRIC: THE SELF-REVEALING GOD

On the other hand, a trinitarian theology of religions allows a genuine self-differentiation and self-communication of God in historical concreteness (and rationality): God, the absolute Ground of Being, is manifest in creative, healing, illuminating, and fulfilling effects. In such a theistic perspective God becomes a partner in relationship with whom a specific form of communication is possible. For Christians, the universal and normative manifestation of God is found in the life and suffering of Jesus Christ as witnessed in the biblical tradition. Other religions will have other universal-normative manifestations valid for them.

Once again, if this aspect of the self-revealing character of the Divine is overemphasized, there is the danger of identifying the Absolute with its historical manifestations—the peril of idolatry.

SPIRIT-CENTERED: THE OMNIPRESENT GOD

A trinitarian theology of religions also affirms the omnipresent power of the Spirit of God, which penetrates the cosmic process as a whole and which inspires humans and enables them to recognize the reality and presence of the Divine. Such an inner experience of the Spirit can lead one into the depths of the Divine Ground of Being, even to the point of identification with it. And so we witness in various forms how religious traditions speak of the oneness of the human person with the universe, or the identity between Atman and Brahman.

If, however, this aspect of the omnipresent, all-penetrating, and enlightening immanence is overemphasized, there is the danger of an ahistorical pantheism: The Divine becomes identical with the innermost principle of existence and indistinguishable from it. It is experienced in the depths of human consciousness where the ego, the cosmos, and the Ultimate Reality coincide. Such a spirituality can easily lead to a withdrawal from earthly reality, considering it only an illusion. History is no longer a medium of specific revelations.

BALANCE

A trinitarian theology of religious pluralism, in trying to understand and articulate the relationship of immanence and transcendence within the Divine Ground of Being, achieves a balance among these three essential ingredients: it affirms (1) the radical otherness of God beyond all finite reality, (2) the authentic self-disclosure of the Divine, and (3) the active presence of the Divine in both natural and human history. This framework is designed from a Christian perspective and does *not* stand as some kind of meta-theory that

is above all traditions and so to be adopted by all traditions. On the contrary, it is a perspective homegrown in Christian soil. And so it seeks to make room for this center of Christian identity and to allow this center to serve Christians as the means to understand the universal presence of the Divine within the plurality of religions, without, however, identifying monistically this universal presence with the very Ground of Being itself. But in no way does such a viewpoint wish to claim that because a trinitarian faith has the ability to integrate the diversity of religions, it is therefore the “true and absolute religion.”²²

From such a theological perspective the religious traditions of the world are seen as “platforms” for the active presence of God. And yet, it recognizes that not everything that presents itself in the dress of spirituality really is a manifestation of the Divine Ground of Being—neither in Christianity nor in other religions. How often in the history of religions have claims to “bring salvation” brought nothing more than misery and conflict? It is of critical importance to have criteria by which we can discern authentic from inauthentic religion. Each religion will bring to the table criteria from its own core beliefs and practices. For Christians, these criteria are found in seeking to conform to the Spirit that filled Jesus in his life and his suffering and that continues to act powerfully, beyond his death, in the life of the community.

On the basis of what we can call a revelatory or representative Christology, Christians can speak of a qualitative identity of the universal creative and innovative energy of God with the particular manifestation of this energy in Jesus the Christ. And Christians can do this without claiming that the universal Spirit of the eternal God is present exclusively or exhaustively in this Christ-representation, as if all of the Spirit’s actions and revelations have to originate from Jesus the Christ.

The doctrine of the Trinity is the Christian answer to the question of the immanence of the transcendent. All religions of revelation have attempted to answer this question in their own ways. The different answers cannot possibly be harmonized. It seems to me, therefore, that the religions will never totally move beyond a “Ptolemaic” framework; they will have to engage each other in a never-ending dialogue of their “mutually inclusive” viewpoints, each worked out from the standpoint of one’s own tradition. Each viewpoint includes others and stands ready to be included by others. Such a mutually inclusive model does justice to the requirements of a truly pluralistic

²² See Gisbert Greshake, *Der dreieine Gott: Eine trinitarische Theologie*, 4th ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 2001). In Greshake, however, this statement is not to be understood in the sense of a religio-theological exclusivism but rather in the sense of an “appealed Christian inclusivism” connected with a reference to mutuality through which in interreligious dialogue the fullness of the dimensions of God can be discovered (516). But, in the last analysis, Greshake does want to make sure that the fullness of the ultimate word of revelation, spoken by God, has become reality in Christ. The final completion of the history of religions consists in the merging of the many ways of non-Christian religions in *this* “Gestalt” of revelation.

theology of religions without falling into the problems inherent in John Hick's notion of the Real, especially the problem of losing a true immanence of the Transcendent. The particular contribution of a trinitarian theology of religions that would protect against this danger is its fundamental understanding of the Divine Ground of Being as a *relational* Ground; relationality is of the essence of the Divine. By the demands of its very being, the Divine must relate by representing itself in history, especially in the religious history of humanity.

I believe that what I have attempted to do in this essay—using my Christian trinitarian perspective—is what is needed within all the religious traditions: let each religious community make use of its own theological-philosophical resources to establish bridgeheads for recognizing and encountering other religions. Each bridgehead will be *inclusive* insofar as it starts on the side of one's own religion; but it will also be *mutual* since it will open one's own tradition to the challenging otherness of other religions. In this way, I believe, we can move forward toward a "second-order understanding" of religious pluralism that will be truly pluralistic.

—TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN
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