Part I

The returning other

1

Rethinking theology of religions

This is a book about what is sometimes called the 'wider ecumenism', about the place of Christianity in a world of many faiths, and about that contemporary development within Christian practice known as inter-faith dialogue.[1] But it is also, more broadly, about the ethics of discipleship, about the way Christians are to live in a multi-faith world. The two are obviously connected. Whatever I do, whatever I say, whatever I think, at some point my beliefs, and the practices to which they give rise, raise questions about the means which I use in developing relations with others; in brief, questions about power and control and the risk of violence done to the other. The result is a dilemma. How to remain faithfully rooted in my own Christian vision of a time-honoured truth and yet become open to and respectful of those committed to sometimes very different beliefs and values? Clearly this dilemma has serious implications, not just for how Christians are to live responsibly alongside their neighbours from other religious traditions, but for how the whole project of Christian theology is to be pursued in what I shall call an all-pervasive 'context of otherness'.

Not that such a dilemma describes a narrowly Christian agenda. In their different ways, all religious communities in the fast-changing secularised world of post-modernity face similar questions – about faith and tradition, loyalty and openness, about accommodation and the place of religion in civic society. But it is as a Christian theologian that I write, and with a Christian version of the dilemma that I am concerned. My conviction is that it is perfectly possible for persons of faith to maintain their

[1] 'Inter-faith' and 'inter-religious' tend to be used interchangeably; the former has inter-personal, the latter more inter-systemic, connotations.

own integrity while yet learning how to relate responsibly and sensitively to each other. Indeed, I would want to argue that it is *only* through maintaining that integrity in relationship that the harmony of a wider multi-faith world can be promoted.

Possible but not easy. I write these words in the middle of a strongly multi-faith town in west London where difference and otherness is very definitely the context of everyday life. Over the last quarter of a century, immigration, mainly from the sub-continent of India, has drastically changed the religious and cultural profile of this part of the capital city. There is a flourishing mosque five minutes away at the end of my street; the biggest Sikh gurdwara outside Punjab is being built close by; between them sit two Hindu temples and a Buddhist vihara. There are, according to some estimates, more than fifty communities or groups of faith within a mile's radius of the railway station – itself remarkable for having signs written in English and Punjabi. More recently the influx of refugees and asylum-seekers, from parts of Africa and from Eastern Europe, has added an extra layer of multi-cultural complication. This is a world unimaginable just a generation ago, a world in which the ancient stereotypes of East and West no longer apply. To walk these streets is to become vividly aware that, for all the grand talk of globalisation, the global only ever exists within the local. Underneath the romantic image conjured by exotic fruit, fragrant aromas and multi-coloured saris, the reality is more intractable. The tensions and rivalries of whole continents are forced to live cheek by jowl within single blocks.

In the middle of such a chaos of human religiosity, the mainstream Christian churches can be forgiven for feeling overwhelmed. One temptation is to retreat, to create safe enclaves in the middle of what often appears as a thoroughly hostile environment. Another is to seek to establish a comparable prominence with belligerent slogans and antagonistic rhetoric. But, for many Christians living in such an environment, another vision is beginning to make itself felt, a vision of a Church committed to mediation and the building of bridges between communities. That this is a more risky option is clear. In principle, faith is always 'inter-faith', formed and practised in relationship with others; at the heart of the Gospel is a message of peace and reconciliation which crosses all social and cultural barriers. In practice, of course, establishing a basis for positive relations is rarely straightforward. Even apart from considerable theological problems about how the mission which Christ gave to his Church is to be understood, communities are divided by age-old suspicions as

well as by language and custom. The history of inter-religious relations, often a record of colonial exploitation and unresolved ethnic and inter-communal rivalries, makes a confused situation even more complex. The dangers of manipulation, by one party or the other, the possibilities for misunderstanding on both sides, are all too real. Emphasise distinctiveness and you encourage a self-satisfied sectarianism; suppress it and you risk a fundamentalist backlash. On the streets of a town where difference is as glaringly obvious as the hoardings advertising the latest offerings from Bollywood, traditional Christian language about conversion, proclamation, even mission itself, becomes problematic. All of which is to repeat the dilemma, and to ask how Christians committed to a vocation which is nothing if not prophetic are to practise an ethic which would take seriously a responsibility for the peace and harmony of all God's creation.

A theological response

That is only the first of many questions which will be raised, like so many placards at a protest rally, throughout the course of this book. Most will turn out to be versions of the dilemma noted above. How to develop an ethical theology? How does a Church which is conscious of being called by God's Word of truth discharge that responsibility while, at the same time, remaining responsible before the demands of a religiously plural world? How, to use the language of Justin and Irenaeus, to discern in this context possible 'seeds of the Word'? It may be objected, of course, that it is easy to ask questions and to remain content with posing dilemmas. I shall not seek to answer that charge at this stage. I hope it will be sufficient to state that throughout this book I shall be concerned with practice and with a theology which both emerges from the practice of faith and feeds back into it. And by practice of faith I mean both the liturgical and devotional roots from which the community's faith, its vision of its evangelical responsibility, springs *and* all those forms of engagement with others which faith supports and inspires. That does not mean that I shall be avoiding the theoretical; indeed at times the discussion of some of the more awkward philosophical and theological questions may appear to digress a long way from the practice of engagement with people of other faiths on the streets of our inner cities. That dilemmas, such as I have proposed, demand careful thought I do not doubt. But the point I want to stress at the outset is that there is more to questions and dilemmas than an intellectual challenge which theology is called upon to resolve. They

are the very stuff out of which faith grows, the poles which define the limits of the language of faith, and pointers to what I shall call the 'possibility of God'. If, as I shall seek to argue, to do theology is to speak of God in response to God's Word, then the first task is to listen for possible 'seeds of the Word', what God may be saying in this new context of otherness. If nothing else, questions and dilemmas guard against the greatest temptation faced by the theologian, the tendency to seek premature closure, to put a limit on the extent of God's Word. More positively, the issue is what is to be learned for Christian faith and practice from the engagement with the other.

Open-ended questions about the possibility of God in the world of many faiths, questions once consigned to the fringes of Christian reflection, have emerged in recent years as a distinct area of theology, often referred to as the theology of religions. This term is problematic, for a number of reasons. In some accounts there seems to be no distinction between religions and 'religion', in the all-encompassing singular. Both are synonymous with 'universal' or 'world' theologies which seek to include the whole of the religious experience of humankind within a single scheme.[2] These remain, at best, utopian projects. Jacques Dupuis, who briefly draws attention to this point at the beginning of his magisterial survey of theology of religions, perhaps wisely prefers to speak of a 'Christian theology of religious pluralism'. To work from within a religious tradition such as Christianity, he argues, does not demand a parochial defensiveness. But neither does it require a levelling of all that is different and distinctive. The theological task is to work within an horizon which recognises through experience that commitment to one's own faith can – and perhaps must – grow through dialogue and conversation.[3] Certainly a 'universalist perspective' seems almost like a contradiction in terms; as we shall see shortly, supposedly 'neutral' positions usually turn out, on further inspection, to be heavy with their own particular ideological baggage. On the other hand, Dupuis's apparent willingness to assimilate all history to Christian history raises its own questions – again ethical as much as theological – about how, precisely, Christians are to 'leave room and indeed create space for other "confessional" theologies of religion, be they Muslim, Hindu or otherwise'.[4] Does not the project of

[2] E.g. Swidler 1987; Cantwell Smith 1981.

[3] Dupuis 1997:1–13.

[4] Dupuis 1997:7.

'theology of religions', with the adherence to the Christian meta-narrative which it implies, lead to the eradication of the otherness of the other?

A more immediate – because easily disregarded – problem with the term is the subtly subversive effect it has on the whole project of Christian theology. According to Dupuis, theology of religions as a 'distinct theological *subject*' dates from the early 1970s.[5] Before that, in most of the Christian churches relations with people of other faiths were considered within the doctrine of salvation.[6] The other was very definitely a theological 'problem' to be solved. In the Roman Catholic Church the major catalyst for change was, of course, the Second Vatican Council which shifted attention away from the question of the 'individual outside the Church' to a more positive assessment of the significance for the Church's own identity of the individual as a member of an historically and socially constituted religious community.[7] Once, not so long ago, 'they' were lumped together as 'non-Christians'; now they are Buddhists and Jews, Muslims and Hindus – people of distinct religious belief and practice, who have all assumed their own identities, their worlds no longer the distant fringes of a Christianity-centred universe. At the same time, the borders separating theology and its disciplines from the various branches of religious studies have become more diffuse. Theology and its 'publics' – to use David Tracy's term – can no longer be confined within the neat schemes of Church, the academy and society at large.[8] 'Other religions', other persons of faith, the all-pervading 'context of otherness', make legitimate demands on the theologian and force Christians to cross boundaries – whether they like it or not.

Pluralism and paradigms

More is at stake here than the emergence of yet another discrete area of study to be pressed into service within the ever-crowded curricula of universities and seminaries. A theology which would respond to the other

[5] Dupuis 1997:2–3 refers to V. Boublik's *Teologia delle Religioni* (Rome: Studium; 1973) as the first 'extensive study'.

[6] See e.g. Daniélou 1948; 1962; Eminyan 1960; Maurier 1965; Nys 1966; Sullivan 1992; and the extensive bibliography and discussion in Dupuis 1997:84–157.

[7] The shift is central to Dupuis's distinction between 'fulfilment theories' (e.g. de Lubac, von Balthasar) and those which seek to express 'the Mystery of Christ in the Religious Traditions' (e.g. Rahner, Panikkar). See Dupuis 1997:130–57.

[8] See Tracy 1982:6–28.

does not so much extend existing categories beyond the traditional limits of mission and Church as create new ones – notably dialogue and culture – which challenge *all* traditional categories. It is, however, by no means obvious that the truly revolutionary nature of this shift has been properly recognised. In recent years a large number of surveys and overviews have appeared which give a fairly consistent 'map' of the area.[9] Thus the language of what has come to be known as the 'threefold paradigm', 'exclusivism', 'inclusivism' and 'pluralism', is thoroughly familiar. This, however, has not been an unmixed blessing. As Gavin D'Costa points out, employed heuristically or pedagogically, the typology has its uses. Nevertheless, the fact remains that it is basically a simplification of a highly complex issue, 'forcing diverse materials into easily controlled locations'.[10]

What is meant by these three terms is fairly obvious: exclusivism privileges one's own tradition against all others; inclusivism patronises other traditions as lesser or partial versions of what is realised in only one; pluralism argues for the relativising of all traditions, including one's own. Now, understood in terms of theological *tendencies* which emphasise theological instincts or values – for example, the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love, which are to be developed within the actual process of dialogue – they can be understood not as mutually exclusive positions but as complementary perspectives which need somehow to be held together. In due course, I shall seek to argue in this way.[11] As used in the literature of theology of religions, however, they remain all too easily at the level of 'isms', theories which, as decidedly flat abstractions, have a limited purchase on the much more diffuse and emotionally freighted practices of engagement between the people who walk the streets of our multi-faith inner cities.

My major objection to this 'paradigm approach' to theology of religions is that it tends to serve the interests of the pluralist agenda only. This, of course, is the school associated with the name of John Hick and the theologians of what might be called the 'Myth of Christian

[9] See e.g. Knitter 1985; D'Costa 1986; Barnes 1989. The typology first appears in Race 1983. Race himself ascribes it to Hick. The most comprehensive account of Hick's own position is contained in Hick 1989:233ff. For Hick's earlier theological development and 'Copernican revolution', first adumbrated in Hick 1977, see D'Costa 1987:13ff. For a brief overview of a rapidly changing scene see D'Costa's essay, 'Theology of Religions', in Ford 1997:626–44.

[10] In Ford 1997:637.

[11] In chapters 7 and 8, following ideas suggested by Mathewes 1998.

Uniqueness' school. Hick's 'normative pluralism' claims to represent the only theologically plausible account of today's world of many religions.[12] So-called 'exclusivism' and 'inclusivism' are soon given the status of preliminary and inadequate adjuncts, leading inexorably to a theological 'crossing of the Rubicon' into the theologically more straightforward world of 'pluralism'.[13] This rapid reduction of theological history represents a very partial reading of the Christian encounter with the other. How adequate, for example, are terms like 'exclusivism' and 'inclusivism' for describing the work of Barth and Rahner respectively, the usual suspects rounded up to represent the contemporary traditions of Catholic and Reformed Christianity respectively?[14] That there is truth in what remains admittedly a sketchy outline is clear; Christianity has at times been both proudly exclusive and naively inclusive of the other. But this is not the whole story, and Hick's sometimes sweeping generalisations inevitably ignore elements of an important counter-tradition.[15]

Religions, culture and identity

On closer examination, the very attempt to cut through the complexities of centuries of dialogue, conflict and inter-religious rivalry, reveals a number of hidden presuppositions. Two may be noted at this stage. Firstly, to work as a normative thesis, some phenomenology of commonality must be established. It is, however, all too easy to slip from identifying a 'common context' within which spiritual or religious phenomena are discerned to speaking of a 'common core' to which such phenomena can somehow be assimilated. That there are many 'family resemblances' between religious traditions is clear: the mythical, the devotional, the scriptural, the ethical and so on. Any dialogue must be led by some initial assumptions about what makes for comparability. On closer examination,

[12] For a critique of 'normative pluralism' see my chapter on Religious Pluralism in the forthcoming *Penguin Companion to the Study of Religion*, edited by John Hinnells, London: Penguin; expected 2002.

[13] See e.g. Hick, 'The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity', in Hick and Knitter 1987:16–36.

[14] The subsuming of Roman Catholic theology of religions within the category of 'inclusivism' fails to distinguish between what might be called a 'universalist instinct' which is to be found in some form in most of the great world faiths (see the examples in Griffiths 1990) and the theology of religions associated with Karl Rahner, the thesis of the Anonymous Christian. As Rahner argues, this is a response to a dogmatic problem which is specific to Catholic Christianity. See e.g. Rahner 1966a; 1966b; 1978:311–21; Hebblethwaite 1977; Schwerdtfeger 1982; D'Costa 1985. As for the 'exclusivist' end of the spectrum, a great deal of nuance is needed, as is noted in Knitter 1985:73–119.

[15] See my comments in 'Religious Pluralism', in Hinnells, ed. (n12 above).

however, the putative basis of comparison is often put into question. Holy founders, for instance, do not fulfil the same role in all religions; nor do apparently common features such as sacred books and symbolic representation. Is there not a danger of forcing awkwardly unstable religious realities into a Procrustean bed of untrammelled homogeneity? It sounds plausible to invoke the imagery of paths up the same mountain or rivers flowing into the great ocean. But even such high-minded metaphors can turn out to be subtly oppressive. Ironically the very seriousness with which the particularity of the other is treated turns out to be so dominated by theory and so far removed from everyday practice that the other is not taken seriously enough.[16]

The covert shift from 'common context' to 'common core' raises the suspicion that the pluralist rhetoric, which would understand 'the religions' as different instantiations of the same genus, owes more to Enlightenment constructions of 'religion' than to observation of what Lash calls 'the ancient traditions of devotion and reflection, of worship and enquiry'.[17] The model by which Enlightenment rationalism identified discrete 'religions' was the deism which dominated the debate about the nature of Christian faith in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[18] This, of course, gave a privileged place to a transcendent Absolute reality, the ultimate object of human understanding, and was rooted in what developed into an all-pervading dualism of sacred and profane. As God was set apart from the world, so the practices of religion came to be divorced from everyday living. It is a short step from the isolation of the essence of all human religion to the identification of all sorts of discrete phenomena, beliefs as much as practices, which are supposed to be typical of a particular dimension of human life known as the 'religious'.

Leaving the intractable, yet relatively insignificant, question of the definition of religion to one side, there is a very practical issue here for any community of faith seriously committed to engagement with the other. However similar beliefs and practices appear, it is by no means obvious that they spring from the same roots or represent similar motivations. Before the experience of a plurality of 'religions' constructed a generic concept called 'religion', human religiosity was inseparable from

[16] See e.g. Surin 1990; D'Costa 1990c.

[17] Lash 1996:21. On the 'creation of religion' in the early modern period and the effect this has had on theology and political thought through the privatising of faith see Cavanaugh 1995.

[18] On the genealogy of 'religion' see Lash 1996 who draws particularly on the historical work of Harrison 1990. See also Cantwell Smith 1963; Byrne 1998 and Smith 1998.

what in the West has come to be referred to as culture, those customary processes of remembrance and ritual by which a community identifies and protects itself. As Michael Paul Gallagher points out, 'a central crisis of culture today comes from the split between culture and religion over the last two centuries'.[19] The question being begged by an hypothesis which would bypass such complexities is precisely what processes are responsible for creating specific creeds and belief-systems from the total world-views of particular communities of faith.[20] With an essentially 'modern' self-confidence in its ability to comprehend the world, normative pluralism is unable to respond to the difficult conceptual issues of identity and relationality with which the practice of what has come to be known as 'inculturation' challenges the Church. This raises, in a different form, the ethical issue of power and control which dominates the contemporary debate about inter-religious relations.

Contradictions and ethical questions

There is a second irony here, for it is precisely this challenge which the reading of the Christian theological tradition by the 'Myth school' claims to address. Having bought into a secularised version of Enlightenment religiosity, normative pluralism can only repeat, rather than radicalise, that element of the Christian tradition which it so roundly criticises. The argument of the Myth school is that claims for the salvific effectiveness of Christianity over against the inadequacy of non-Christian beliefs are arrogant and morally unacceptable. Yet the very language in which the pluralist paradigm is couched remains that of the – Christianity-centred – salvation problematic. Hick, for instance, sets the exclusivist claim to a 'Christian monopoly of salvific truth and life' against the 'logical conclusion' to which observation of the 'fruits of religious faith in human life' inevitably leads. The great religious traditions, he contends, promote 'individual and social transformation' to 'about the same extent'.[21] Therefore any argument for the superior effectiveness of Christianity is simply misplaced. But this attempt to relativise all soteriologies masks a

[19] Gallagher 1997:23.

[20] Wilfred Cantwell Smith consistently refuses to reduce communities of faith to separate and definable 'religions'; see 1962; 1963; 1981. Harrison 1990 takes up Cantwell Smith's thesis in an account of the origins of the modern concept of 'religion' and the development of the 'history of religions' as a discrete object of study.

[21] Hick and Knitter 1987:23.