

Theology and the Dialogue of Religions

Theology of religions is an area of theological reflection on inter-religious relations which raises fundamental questions not just for Christians but for all people of faith in a pluralist, post-modern world. How to practise a religious faith with integrity while respecting other claims to ultimate truth? Must 'the other' always be regarded as a problematic complication on the fringes of a Christianity-centred world? Is there a 'third way' between an all-dominating exclusivism and a tacit relativism? This book contributes to the debate about the place of inter-religious relations in the life of the Church by developing a 'theology of dialogue'. In offering a critique of much current thinking in this area, Michael Barnes SJ proposes instead a theology rooted in the themes of welcome and hospitality. He argues for a vision of Christianity as a 'school of faith', a community called not just to teach others but to learn from them as well.

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En hommage à mon ami
Daniel Faivre,
un véritable homme de dialogue
inter-religieux.

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Preface

More than ten years ago I wrote a book called *Religions in Conversation* which in their more mellow moments my friends tell me still has something to commend it. At the time I felt I wanted to contribute to a debate about what has come to be known as the theology of religions. The book fitted into the general category of a survey of a rapidly expanding field. In general that book was well received. One review even praised its intelligence (which pleased me) but criticised it for avoiding the awkward questions (which didn't). The nub of the criticism was that the author had found his way to the centre of a complex labyrinth but, once there, had little idea about how to get out again. Having pondered the issues at much greater depth since that relatively youthful excursion I feel I am now more happy to stay immured in the richness and complexity of inter-religious relations. The key questions, I am convinced, are not about the return and subsequent reflection – which remain comparatively straightforward – but how to cross over the threshold in the first place, how to get to the centre of a different and even threatening world, and how to remain there with a measure of Christian integrity.

This present study continues, and I hope deepens, that initial enthusiasm for the life of inter-faith engagement. I am confident that at some level it touches upon all the most important issues surrounding inter-religious dialogue and the place of Christianity in a multi-faith world – issues about Christ and Church, revelation, salvation and mission. This is not, however, a straightforward work of systematic theology. It will quickly become apparent to the reader that the dissatisfaction with much current thinking in this area which I hinted at in the earlier book has become a more blunt rejection in the present one. It is not so much that I find myself out of sympathy with the theological

status quo in this area; it is rather that I am concerned that the challenge of other faith traditions, with all its complex ambiguities, should prompt Christians to exercise their theological imagination creatively and responsibly. To continue to treat people of other faiths as a ‘problem’ on the fringes of a still largely Christian world manifestly fails to do this. I am more concerned with a theology which arises from the various forms of dialogue with other religions, not with an exercise in preparing for such an engagement. To pick up one of the insights which has survived the transition from the earlier book relatively unscathed, I want to develop a ‘theology *of* dialogue’ rather than a ‘theology *for* dialogue’.

The debate about the significance of religious pluralism for Christian faith involves a number of audiences. The present work originated as a doctoral thesis for the University of Cambridge and still retains traces of the demands of the academy. It has, however, been completely rewritten in order to reach a wider readership, both within the Church and in wider society. Inevitably there is a certain mixture of styles, and even genres, of theological writing, for which I can only crave the reader’s indulgence. Some chapters are more obviously addressed to its former audience, particularly where philosophical questions about the nature of human subjectivity and relationality are involved. Others arise more directly from the contemporary experience of a Church committed to inter-faith dialogue. The book should be read as a dialogue between the two – hence the titles of the two parts, ‘the returning other’ and ‘dialogue and God’. The rationale is explained towards the end of the first chapter. To anticipate briefly: there I argue that Christian discipleship in a multi-faith society can no longer afford to patronise others into a pre-determined scheme of things. The alternative, however, is not to close the borders or, more dubiously, to rub them out. It is to ask where God may be speaking across and between those borders. To answer that question adequately requires more than merely listening to the one whom Christians call the Word of God; it means attending to those complex processes which allow and sustain human relationships. What, I am asking, is the source of the dispositions and attitudes which are needed for life in a multi-faith society? How do Christians learn how to relate to the other?

Those last two words hold the book together. ‘The other’ is at once a post-modern term of mind-bending obscurity and the heart of the Gospel reality: stranger, neighbour, potential friend, with whom so much is shared yet who often represents a difference which can only be

comprehended in the silence of faith. Between these two poles, the fragmented world of post-modernity and the pages of the scriptural witness, another other, the otherness of God is revealed. Part I of the book moves deliberately between the authoritative textual tradition of the Roman Catholic Church and the hermeneutical issues which the 'question of the other' raises. Part 2 sketches the outlines of a theology of dialogue which emerges from the Church's life of faith. But in the last analysis my theme is God and the various ways in which Christians, alongside persons who practise the ways of life inscribed in the great world religions, can speak about God. I make no apologies for writing as a convinced believer in the God of Jesus Christ. Indeed it is precisely because I am such a believer that I can also write, as much from my own experience as from my knowledge of the Christian revelation, about the other.

There is, inevitably, something autobiographical in any book, especially one which seeks to sum up a lengthy theological trajectory. Many teachers, colleagues and friends have contributed in different ways to this book. This brief note can include only the more recent. Among these the most important debt is owed to the supervisor of the original thesis, David Ford, who has been the benign godfather of so much of my thinking since he dropped the name of Levinas in my hearing during a lecture on inter-faith relations several years ago. I should also acknowledge the contributions of the examiners of the original thesis, Nicholas Lash and Rowan Williams, for the precision of their questions, the generosity of their comments, and the inspiration which they have always provided. For their help in transforming the text I am indebted to the editors of this series, especially Dan Hardy, and to Kevin Taylor of Cambridge University Press. I have received particularly generous support from Gwen Griffith Dickson and Bill Tomkiss who made heroic efforts to read and comment on various drafts. Many friends, colleagues and students, both at Cambridge and at Heythrop College in London, have made helpful noises and kept me from the grosser mistakes. My thanks for good conversation, important questions and equally important moments of relaxation, to Sarah Boss, Stephen Buckland, James Crampsey, Philip Endean, Laurence Hemming, Michael Ivens, John McDade, John Montag and Catherine Pickstock. A special debt is owed to Joe Laishley for his conscientious and imaginative criticism, to Gavin D'Costa for many useful suggestions, and to Graham Ward, who supervised my work at Cambridge in its initial stages and generously shared with me his enthusiasm for the thought of Michel de Certeau.

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For helping me to root my theology in something more than the offerings of sundry libraries I owe a great debt to many friends and acquaintances from different faith traditions, both in Britain and India, especially Mr P. L. Soba of the Valmiki Sabha in Southall. I was extremely fortunate at an early stage in my research to benefit from a grant from the All Saints Educational Trust which made possible a trip to India. On that trip I was privileged to meet and get to know dalits and dalit theologians. My thanks are due particularly to Michael Jeyaraj, John Kumar and their colleagues at IDEAS in Madurai, V. Devasahayam at Gurukul and my Jesuit brethren at Arul Kadul, both in Chennai. Most especially I thank Antony Raj for long and stimulating conversation; X. Thamburaj for lending me his precious *Abhishiktananda* manuscript; S. Rajamanickam for sharing his immense learning about Roberto de Nobili; Sister Marie Rose at the Ananda Ashram, Kulitalai, for giving me so much material on Jules Monchanin; and John Packiaraj for good advice, generous hospitality, and for helping me negotiate the transport system in Hyderabad. I would also like to express thanks to the Teape Committee in Cambridge for inviting me to give the Teape lecture in India in December 1998. A month of lectures, from Delhi and Pune to Hyderabad and Chennai, proved to be invaluable in clarifying my thinking and for providing further opportunity to improve my knowledge of the Church and theological developments in the sub-continent. My only regret is that constraints of time and distance have made it impossible for me to do a rapidly changing scene full justice.

Final, and very inadequate, words of gratitude should be expressed to two good friends; firstly to Chris Roberts without whose constant interest this book would never have been finished; secondly, to my much revered colleague, Daniel Faivre, a self-confessed 'bombastic Frenchman', without whom it would never have been started. It was Daniel who got me involved in inter-faith relations in Southall many years ago. This book is respectfully dedicated to him.

Abbreviations

Documents of the Second Vatican Council

AG	<i>Ad Gentes</i> (Decree on Missions)
DH	<i>Dignitatis Humanae</i> (Declaration on Religious Freedom)
DV	<i>Dei Verbum</i> (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation)
GS	<i>Gaudium et Spes</i> (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World)
LG	<i>Lumen Gentium</i> (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church)
NA	<i>Nostra Aetate</i> (Declaration on non-Christians)
SC	<i>Sacrosanctum Concilium</i> (Constitution on the Liturgy)
UR	<i>Unitatis Redintegratio</i> (Decree on Ecumenism)

Translations in this study are all taken from *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, edited by Norman P. Tanner; London: Sheed and Ward; Washington DC: Georgetown University Press; 1990.

Other abbreviations

AS	<i>Acta Synodalia</i>
CBCI	Catholic Bishops Conference of India
DM	<i>The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions (Reflections and orientations on dialogue and mission)</i> (SNC)
DP	<i>Dialogue and Proclamation</i> (PCIRD)
DS	<i>Denziger-Schönmetzer</i>

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ET	English translation
<i>Exx</i>	<i>Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola</i>
NBCLC	National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre (Bangalore)
PCIRD	Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue
SNC	Secretariat for non-Christians
SPCU	Secretariat for promoting Christian Unity
ST	<i>Summa Theologica</i>