

Theology and the Dialogue of Religions

by

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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; Emínyan 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.

fundamental confusion. It is one thing to criticise versions of the thesis which insist that no one may be saved outside a particular tradition for being narrowly chauvinist; it is quite another to conclude that all ways to salvation are variations of a common theme. It simply does not follow that, because all religious traditions can be understood as ways to salvation, enlightenment or the saving knowledge of God, they are all equally valid ways. Moreover, in Hick's hands, what purports to be an objective, neutral and universal perspective looks suspiciously like a contradiction in terms. On the one hand, each religion is given equal soteriological value; on the other, a privilege is assumed by the pluralist 'system' itself.²²

As a reaction against the chauvinism of a theology which would ignore all claims to truth in other traditions of faith, the normative hypothesis has a simplicity and an elegance which commands attention. But it also runs its own risks. By masking difference and otherness under an amiable mask of tolerance, it seeks to claim the moral high-ground for an all-encompassing vision. Such ethical self-righteousness turns out in the end, however, to be strangely unethical. More intractable questions about the manipulations inherent in theory itself, questions about power and control, are easily ignored. What sort of violence is done to the other by totalising forms of discourse—even the confessedly tolerant discourse of pluralism which grants everyone a place? From what position does the observer speak? How is such an abstraction, an apparent view from nowhere, possible? More awkwardly, if the other is genuinely other, different, strange and unknown, how can anyone claim to know the other as other, let alone speak *on behalf of* the other?

That the intentions of the Myth school are admirable is clear, but it is all too easy, in a multi-faith world, to seek to reconcile the claims of secular humanism with various forms of more or less strident religious revivalism by attempting to rewrite religious traditions in the light of some overarching universal vision. The more demanding challenge is to work within and between the living traditions, not to seek to extract from them some supposedly timeless essence. The religious communities which mingle on the streets of many of our cities manage a reasonably benign form of peaceful co-existence; genuine understanding is another matter. A certain degree of tolerance, the willingness to put one's own deeply held beliefs in brackets, may be essential if an engagement

²² See Barnes 1989; Loughlin 1990; D'Costa 1996:74–82.

with the other is to begin. But tolerance can be an expression of the power of the stronger, a proscription on open-ended engagement which keeps people apart rather than enabling a full and frank exchange, with all the threats to security which the naming of prejudices involves. Religious beliefs, still more the communities which seek to practise them, do not describe neat, ordered worlds. And, however much exhortations are made about recognising common values, the sources of motivation in the particular traditions themselves are rarely touched. Indeed, particularity can all too easily be subsumed under an ethic of openness which quickly becomes rigidly ideological. By defining *in advance* the canons of acceptable religious value in a multi-faith world, the normative pluralist project has already determined, and therefore controls, the response which the other can make.

The post-modern context

What sort of alternative to such a pluralist-dominated theology of religions is possible? To read history as a more or less straightforward progress towards ever more ‘reasonable’ accounts of Christian faith is to reduce the role of theology to monochrome discussions about the reconciliation of ‘family resemblances’. The other is still a ‘problem’ to be excluded, included or – more safely – ‘pluralised’. Far from opening up theology to fresh insights, the ‘threefold paradigm’ settles it into a safe and predictable agenda. Even proposals for a ‘fourth paradigm’, which seek to break the mould, sometimes risk an uncritical collusion in the pluralist project.²³ That further proposals are needed, to break the current deadlock, is clear. But a distinction needs to be made between those which merely extend the terms of a now stagnant discussion and those which would question the assumptions on which it is based. The proposals which I intend to develop in this book are based on the different logical status of a theology which arises from reflection on the actual engagement with the other and on the whole complex process of inter-personal communication which is represented by the term inter-religious dialogue.

My first concern, therefore, is to register an objection to the terms of a modern, but now curiously dated, project which aims to include all that

²³ See e.g. D’Costa 1986:22–51; 1991; 1996; Barnes 1989:66–86; Loughlin 1990; 1991. For discussion of a ‘fourth paradigm’ see Ogden 1992:79ff.; Di Noia 1992:47ff. The concept of ‘paradigm’ depends, however, on an uncritical reading of Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* which, as some of his critics point out, is itself ambiguous. (See e.g. Shapere 1964.)

exists within universal canons of reason.²⁴ After the manner of Cartesian foundationalism, the pluralist hypothesis presumes to establish a panoptic vision ‘above the action’. What this misses is any sense of being itself part of the ‘context of otherness’: the historical and cultural complexity of the different religious traditions and their fraught and often destructive relations with each other.

The assumption that the mind can somehow surmount the created order is questioned by the cultural sensibility known all too vaguely as post-modernity. Sometimes regarded as an imprecise nostalgic eclecticism rooted in somewhat diffuse shifts in aesthetic awareness, sometimes defined more specifically as a reaction against the Enlightenment legacy and an incredulity towards master narratives, the post-modern is – more obviously – what comes ‘after’ the modern: an uneasy consciousness of reaching a limit, of standing apart from the familiar, and of being forced to wait in the middle of a period which has yet to define itself. Such a sensibility finds one expression in the ironic, playful, relativist terms typical of much contemporary Western thought. But it has also created a healthy critical historicism. In the words of Graham Ward, the post-modern names the unspoken ‘myths and ideologies’, notably the ‘ideology of language’, which have long attended modern thinking: ‘[t]he fetishization of the literal, the unacknowledged presupposition that language refers to things that are pre-linguistic, that words correspond to objects, that discourse is therefore concerned primarily with reference, with responding to and describing the objective nature of the world outside its system’.²⁵ This more conservative post-modernism – conservative in the sense of retrieving traditional forms of discourse and metaphor – opens up the possibility of a creative engagement with the otherness both of history and of culture. To that extent it makes common cause with another voice, one more typical of the East where ‘the other’ is less a philosophical conundrum than an ethical reality: the voice of the politically and economically marginalised and the religiously and culturally different.²⁶

What price the theology of religions in this post-modern context of otherness? To anchor my all-too-brief generalisations in the thoroughly

²⁴ For an account of the beginnings of the modern project in the search for a spatialising ‘*mathesis universalis*’ see Ong 1983, and Pickstock 1998:47–61. For post-modern theological critiques of modernity see Lakeland 1997:12–36; Ward 1997:xv–xlvii.

²⁵ Ward 1997:xvii, xxi.

²⁶ A theme to be developed in chapter 6. See also my discussion of the political dimension of dialogue in Barnes 1999:40–5.

prosaic reality of our fragmented and increasingly secular world, the question is no longer how the traditional Christian language of salvation and incarnation is to be accommodated to an 'other' reality. It is, rather, a matter of how religious discourse *of any kind* is to play a significant part in the process of building a harmonious multi-religious society. To put the point in more overtly Christian terms, it is to ask how Christians can speak of what they know in faith to be true without either relying on an uncritical use of modern 'myths and ideologies' or lapsing back into the oppositionalist discourse of ancient antagonisms. That, in brief, is the ethical *and* theological issue.

Being forced to live cheek by jowl with people who come from very different religious and cultural backgrounds undermines the uncritical self-assurance of the 'threefold paradigm'. This is not, however, to conclude that a post-modern sensibility towards the other somehow presents us with a ready-made alternative to the modern project of theology of religions. Indeed, to speak of 'alternative' theologies is to acquiesce in a fundamentally mistaken perception of the issue. If there is an alternative to a theology of 'other religions', it will emerge from a reflection on 'the other', not on 'religion'. I am, therefore, less concerned with explaining the 'problem' of religious pluralism than with understanding the meaning of the providential mystery of otherness for the life of the Church and for its practice of faith. My aim is not to continue a debate which has long since ceased to be creative, but – more radically – to learn how to read the engagement of Christian faith and the all-pervading context of otherness as revealing possible 'seeds of the Word'. Such a project is, I believe, more generous than that allowed by an approach to theology of religions which does little more than patronise otherness.

Responding to God's Word

What I seek to present is a theology of inter-faith dialogue which responds to the post-modern 'context of otherness'. I want to argue that theology of religions needs to be taken back into the centre of the Christian project of reflection on its experience of the Trinitarian God, the one who goes on generating meaning within the ever-changing flux of human relations through the creative interaction of Word and Spirit. Care needs to be taken, however, that such a project does not appear like some a priori essentialist scheme, imposed unceremoniously on some unsuspecting 'other'.

To begin from the practice of inter-religious dialogue is not an attempt to cut loose from the mainstream of Christian theological reflection, but, on the contrary, to recognise that dialogue is first and foremost a practice of *faith*; it springs from the same roots as the Church's liturgy, the story which Christians seek to tell. I shall seek, therefore, to give a theological account of practices of welcome and hospitality towards the other by rooting them in the formative experiences of the Christian community. In celebrating the Christian story the Church speaks by returning to its origins where it is made conscious of God's act of self-giving—for this and for *all* people. The liturgy is the sacramental act which narrates God's Word and which therefore gives Christians their identity as a people called to speak of what they know in Christ to be true. At the same time, in listening for 'seeds of the Word' Christians learn how to practise that form of waiting upon God's Spirit which mirrors Jesus's responsiveness to the Father. No arbitrary distinction between the two is possible. If all our knowing is relational and contextual – if, that is to say, every act of knowing relates the self to some other – then the encounter with another person, especially one who seeks to speak of what is true for all people, is in some sense an encounter with *the* Other, with God. But in what sense? And how to speak of such a relationship?

The Christian theologian is expected to speak out of the Christian meta-narrative without eradicating the otherness of the other. Emphasising the more ethical side of the dilemma, the task is to be respectful of otherness without slipping into the relativism of incommensurability. So far I have provided no more than dilemmas, questions and an initial sketch which will clearly need more careful elucidation as we proceed. But broad brush-strokes are necessary at this stage, if only that the properly theological questions – that is to say, issues about the nature and presence of God in a multi-faith world – may become clear. A reading of the Christian encounter with the other which stands 'above the action', making the participant in dialogue no more than an observer, risks premature closure; all too easily it domesticates the possibility of God. Indeed it is doubtful whether the trio of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism gives us anything more than a subtly prescriptive account of the actual practice of dialogue – let alone provides the motivation for serious engagement with the other. 'The first', as Rowan Williams puts it, 'rules it out in principle, the second makes a bid for ownership of all that is tolerable and recognisable in other traditions, the third allows no more than unquestioning

co-existence'.²⁷ There is little risk here, no sense of mystery and no sign of a God who seeks to go on speaking God's Word in the demanding but richly rewarding 'middle ground' of human interaction.

This takes us back again to the opening dilemma. When the primary consideration is the development of a certain harmony between religious communities, it is all too easy to underestimate the difficulties of practising an acceptably open and tolerant form of inter-faith dialogue. For Paul Knitter and Hans Küng, for example, inter-faith dialogue is essential for the cause of world peace and human liberation.²⁸ Their point of departure is the 'ethical' end of the dilemma: 'no peace among the nations without peace among the religions'. But peace has to be *made*; it cannot be proclaimed from on high. The question which the 'global ethic' project begs is how people of faith are to be motivated somehow to shift from a purely 'local' to a supposedly 'global' perspective. Such motivation can only come from within the religious tradition. Christians may not have an auspicious record of preaching and practising peace towards people of other religions, but there is no neat ready-made alternative which would avoid careful attention to the Christian concept of the self-communicating God and to what I called earlier the Church's evangelical responsibility to the other.

Dialogue and Radical Orthodoxy

If there is an alternative, a way of engaging with the other which does not do violence to the tradition of faith, it will emerge from reflection on the Christian experience of dialogue itself. But can 'dialogue' be understood in properly *Christian* terms? The term has connotations of a liberal accommodation which makes some theologians distinctly nervous. John Milbank, for instance, approaches my dilemma very much from the theological direction. As the title of the *Radical Orthodoxy* he has inspired indicates, he is engaged in a quite thoroughgoing theological deconstruction of the whole project of inter-faith dialogue. The very language in which the pluralist paradigm is couched represents what he calls an 'ascription to modern liberal Western values [which] does not acknowledge the traditional and continuing political sub-structures

²⁷ Williams 2000:95.

²⁸ See 'Interreligious Dialogue: What? Why? How?' in Swidler *et al.* 1990:19–44; Küng 1993:xi–xii; Küng and Kuschel 1993; Knitter 1995.

which perpetuate these values'.²⁹ His comments draw attention to various presuppositions, especially about the relationship of theory and practice, which must attend any responsible theology of inter-faith encounter. But they also raise the question whether a largely intellectualist model of dialogue is adequate to describe the much more diffuse, laborious and even chaotic pattern of inter-personal and inter-community negotiation which is the reality of so much encounter between persons of faith.

I use that designation 'persons of faith' deliberately at this point to draw attention to another, if very different, example of premature closure – and to the problems incurred by any theology which would reflect on dialogue in a post-modern world. According to John Milbank, the post-modern context of otherness presents 'a moment of opportunity for theology'.³⁰ By refusing to recognise the autonomy of any secular realm, Milbank argues that a space is freed within which theology may speak. There can, therefore, be no Archimedean point of theoretical reason from which the world of religious pluralism is to be judged. Neither can there be any practical, ethical or political reason from which inter-religious discussion and negotiation may be conducted. All forms of supposedly neutral universal reason are culturally loaded and, therefore, forms of a discredited secular reason. The logic of Milbank's position is that the only alternative to a pluralism which invokes secular reason to judge between religious claims is criteria which arise directly from a restatement of Christian belief. Distinctly uneasy with assumptions that dialogue enables participants somehow to transcend the particularities of their own tradition, Milbank is also deeply suspicious of a hidden agenda which holds that 'dialogue gives a privileged mode of access to truth'.³¹

But why should dialogue be understood in this way? There is certainly something attractive about Milbank's insistence that the Church carries its own interpretation of history. Christians speak out of their faith in the God who speaks before them; the Christian language of faith does not *depend* on any dialogue with any other position. Milbank's meaning is clear when he opposes any form of correlational unfolding of the dialectic of sacred and secular to an Augustinian vision of the Church as the City of God, a realm of ontological peace. Whatever its manifest historical

²⁹ Milbank 1990b:175.

³⁰ Milbank 2000:41.

³¹ Milbank 1990b:181.

failures, the Church sets out to be a source of harmony for humankind, a 'hope for community'.³² Milbank thus presents us with a powerful riposte to the fragmentation of the post-modern and its potential for impending chaos. And, in so far as he brings a certain 'hermeneutic of suspicion' back into the practice of dialogue, his is an important reminder that Christianity is not about 'tea and nice conversation' but is based on claims to speak a truth which is subversive of all purely secular pretensions. His trenchant refusal to acknowledge a space independent of the Christian meta-narrative works well as a rejection of post-modern nihilism. But can religious traditions and world-views which have for the most part not been influenced by the values and vested interests of Western culture legitimately be assimilated so neatly to the realm of 'secular reason'?

What allows Milbank to lump religions and secular ideologies together is his idealised reading of Christianity as more post-modern than any other meta-narrative. For Milbank post-modernity presents Christians with a moment of opportunity, but this does not mean that they speak just one more discourse alongside others. In their refusal to draw boundaries, in their rejection of violence, they claim no territory of their own; theirs is the paradox of a 'nomad city'.³³ But, in a manner which is, ironically, all too similar to the 'global ethic' project, not to mention Hick's liberal pluralism, precious little attention is given by Milbank to the laborious and sometimes painful process by which peace is to be achieved. The ideal may be that of a Church on pilgrimage, a Church which is free from the constraints of structure and institution. But even so other-worldly a vision can become over-bearing, a covert violence which does not so much subvert secular pretensions as stand Hick-like 'above the action', avoiding the awkward demands of negotiation with other human beings. The danger, as some of Milbank's critics point out, is that the peace to which this Church is committed does not embrace difference but, through the force of a rhetoric delivered from on high, squeezes the very life out of it.³⁴

For Milbank, dialogue has no theological significance; he is content with a minimalist 'mutual suspicion'.³⁵ The reality for a Church charged not just with bearing a message of truth but with listening for

³² Milbank 1991:232.

³³ Milbank 1991:229.

³⁴ See e.g. Lakeland 1997:68–76, Reader 1997:133–49.

³⁵ Milbank 1990b:190.

the 'seeds of the Word' is considerably more complex. God's Word goes on being spoken – and not only in ways which the Church can presume to know. That there is a properly theological dimension to dialogue, that dialogue can indeed reveal something of God, is brought out by Emmanuel Levinas when he speaks about the 'God who comes to mind' in religion, in liturgy, and in the dialogue with the other person. Dialogue for Levinas is no unequivocal meeting of equals but, on the contrary, is founded in dissymmetry and difference. He wants to 'make it be felt that dialogue . . . is a thinking of the *unequal*, a thought thinking *beyond* the given'.³⁶

In the Western philosophical tradition, as Levinas would remind us, the classic model of dialogue derives from Plato. A process of question and answer leads through the uncovering of ignorance to a fullness of understanding of a given topic.³⁷ For Levinas, however, dialogue is 'not merely a way of speaking', a method for uncovering truth, but a call to transcendence.³⁸ An initial distinction can, therefore, be made between two rather different ways in which the term dialogue is used, depending on whether the emphasis is placed on content or on form. In the first case, dialogue is described as a communication between two individuals who represent different communities of faith, speak a common language, and aim at some sort of consensus.³⁹ In the second, more ethical language is used to speak of the encounter which establishes a relationship between persons. If the former privileges the meaning of what is said over the act of speaking, the latter subordinates the issues discussed to the significance of the encounter itself.⁴⁰ In practice, dialogue is often justified as an end in itself by the potential understanding which the meeting enables.⁴¹ It may be something of an inter-faith cliché, but it remains none the less true, that dialogue takes place when *persons* meet – persons who are divided yet united by the asymmetries of language and discourse, the sensitivities of history and the tragic pathology of misunderstanding.

³⁶ Levinas 1998b:151.

³⁷ See C. Jan Swaeringen, 'Dialogue and Dialectic: The Logic of Conversation and the Interpretation of Logic', in Maranhao 1990:47–72.

³⁸ Levinas 1998b:147.

³⁹ For an excellent account of inter-religious dialogue conceived as debate or apologetics see Griffiths 1991.

⁴⁰ See Tanner 1993:3–6; Lochhead 1988:64.

⁴¹ See e.g. Lochhead 1988:79–81.

Dialogue as critical generosity

It is in this sense of inter-personal engagement, with its ethical overtones, that I use the term ‘dialogue’ in this book. The now standard description of forms of inter-faith dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church puts ‘the dialogue of theological exchange’ alongside ‘dialogue of life’, ‘dialogue of action’ and ‘dialogue of religious experience’.⁴² No further analysis is given in official documents, no indication of how they relate to each other nor of where the distinctions come from.⁴³ The main issue is the relationship between what are seen as the complementary theological claims of ‘dialogue’ and ‘proclamation’, but in none of the documents is the one reduced to the other. Dialogue has its ‘own integrity’, consisting of a whole series of different activities, the practices of a missionary Church, but above all else ‘a manner of acting, an attitude and a spirit . . . [which] implies concern, respect, and hospitality towards the other’.⁴⁴ The praxis of inter-religious dialogue, as Tracy says, ‘does not merely bear a “religious dimension”. It is a religious experience.’⁴⁵

This is what makes inter-faith dialogue in all its many forms worthy of a more generous theological response than ‘mutual suspicion’. If the Gospel really is about recognising and sharing the Good News of God’s own act of welcome and hospitality, then theology has the task of telling that story in all its complexity and most unlikely manifestations. In this book I shall describe inter-faith dialogue as the ‘negotiation of the “middle”’. I do not mean by this some sort of haggling or bargaining over positions of power but, more profoundly, a mediation of the context of otherness. For it is here that Christians find themselves and are faced with the multiple demands of the Church’s evangelical responsibility. Negotiating this ‘space between’ is not, as Milbank seems to assume, a matter of engaging in some unprincipled debate between a series of competing but partial viewpoints from which, one hopes, truth will eventually emerge.

⁴² The fourfold dialogue appears in Pope John Paul II’s 1991 encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, paragraph 57; and in two major Vatican statements on inter-faith dialogue: *Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions*, published by the SNC, 1984; 27–35; and *Dialogue and Proclamation*, published jointly by the PCIRD and the Congregation for Evangelisation, 1991; 42–46. The order of the forms varies.

⁴³ See Sharpe’s discussion of *Redemptoris Missio* and *Dialogue and Proclamation* in Burrows 1994:161–72. Speaking of ‘discursive’, ‘human’, ‘secular’ and ‘interior’ dialogue (originally in his ‘The Goals of Inter-Religious Dialogue’ in Hick 1974:75–95), he acknowledges his debt to the distinctions made by Taylor in ‘The Meaning of Dialogue’, in Jai Singh 1967:55–64.

⁴⁴ DM 29.

⁴⁵ Tracy 1990:98.

It is, rather, to recognise that all Christians speak out of a dimension of irreducible otherness which they encounter at the very heart of their own identity, the ‘middle’ of a world shared with others.

In the next chapter I will try to show that the Church is called constantly to recover the most significant example of this otherness, namely in its historical relationship with the people of the Old Covenant. Just as the encounter with the Jews reveals the other as both ‘not the same’ but not totally other either, so in other forms of inter-faith dialogue Christians learn to recognise not an ‘*alter ego*’, an extension of the self, with whom I share some sort of common essence, but one whom Buber would call ‘thou’, one who calls and to whom I must respond. Rather than a self-sufficient ‘I’ confronting an equally monolithic and unmoving other, some version of the Buberian ‘it’, dialogue always has an inter-personal dimension which makes it intrinsically ethical. The ‘it’ is a ‘thou’: not a ‘thinking subject’ or faceless other but the one who challenges and responds to challenge. The ‘negotiation of the middle’ is not, therefore, an examination of the space where persons meet, but entails exploration of the relationship which the space supports. This – to return to the point argued earlier – is a very different approach to theology of religions from that allowed by the normative pluralism thesis, a model which is irretrievably locked into the search for some overarching universal standard of rationality. However, it needs to be stressed that the alternative to such a model is not the post-modern nihilism which Radical Orthodoxy – quite rightly – seeks to resist. To reject the possibility of an Archimedean place to stand is not to end up imprisoned within particular limited horizons. It is to learn how to speak, how to communicate what we know, and how to learn from what we do not know. As William Placher puts it, ‘[i]n a particular conversation, we learn from a particular conversation partner, in a way shaped by our own previous assumptions as well as by the insights of the person to whom we speak’.⁴⁶

Before briefly outlining something of the direction which this book will take, let me summarise the argument advanced thus far. A theology which arises from the inter-subjective experience of dialogue raises crucial questions from this facing of the other – about subjectivity, otherness and relationality. These questions are not, however, awkward complications to be sidelined, avoided or totalised into some grand theological

⁴⁶ Placher 1989:112.