

Easter V A, May 7, 2023

“Understanding a Theology of Religions”

ST. THOMAS’ EPISCOPAL CHURCH

ST. PETERSBURG, FL

Acts 7: 55-60 • Psalm 31: 1-5, 15-16 • 1 Peter 2: 2-10 • John 14: 1-14



I wrote to you in the Draft this week about my commitment to ecumenical work, that is to say, to the work of Christian unity among denominations. Tomorrow I head to Milwaukee to attend the National Workshop on Christian Unity, which is a large gathering of folks committed to this important work. It will be a very valuable week. But there is another commitment I’ve had for a long time of which I’ve spent significant time studying and deepening my own understanding, and that is interfaith work. My academic interest in this work began in college through the advice of a particularly wise advisor in the Religion department at Wake Forest. Dr. Ken Hogle was also an Episcopalian, and when I mentioned to him that I’d be going to seminary to study for the priesthood, he immediately suggested to me that I change my planned course of study in the religion department. See, I was all geared up to take Bible classes and Christian history classes and the like. He said, “No, no, no, you’re going to get all that in seminary and if you take it now, you’ll be

bored then. What you need to do is take all the religion courses that we offer that you won't get in seminary!" Wise, wise words, which I accepted but not without some grumbling. So, I signed up for classes in Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, classes in Pentecostalism, the African-America religious experience, and Faith in Fiction. And I loved it.

Even though I loved it, it did present me with a certain set of challenges. Probably like a lot of people who grew up in mainline Protestant or Roman Catholic America, I had been under the impression (and why wouldn't I be, right?) that We were right and They were wrong. This kind of binary thinking is common because it's easy. The We in this case were Christians, and the They were Jews and Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists and everybody else. For centuries, religious identity was wrapped up with an us/them mentality, because for centuries (with a few notable exceptions) by and large people's neighbors had the same religious convictions as they did. And so Christians read passages like we hear today, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," and learned that they were right and everybody else was wrong. Which was fine for me too, until it wasn't. And

it started not to be fine through a series of events that all converged upon me in the space of about six years which I'm not going to go into here except to say that my world got a lot larger in a short amount of time and my brain wasn't ready to expand at the same rate. I tell you that because you might be about to have a similar experience and if you're not ready for it, that's ok.

In academic terms, theologically evaluating the phenomena of religions is called the theology of religions. There are three main ways you can approach a theology of religions, but most of us are probably only really familiar with and accepting of one of those ways. So, I'd like to talk about it first. In passages like John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," we can extrapolate that if a person is interested in salvation (which for our purposes here today we'll restrict to a definition of which direction you go when you die) then they need to follow Jesus. Usually, this gets practically interpreted as confessing with you lips and believing in your heart that Jesus is Lord and inviting him into your life as your personal Savior. That's backed up by Romans 10:9. You can learn how to do this from those little comic-book like pamphlets that litter gas stations and bus stops that have

humorous figures on the front but hellfire on the inside. Often this position is as sharply defined as that, which doesn't leave a lot of room for discussion. But if we turn a few pages back in John's gospel we'll be reminded of a pesky little verse that raises a question mark. John 10:16 says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." Now some people who follow this Exclusivism position are open to that, and say something like, "I believe that God is bigger than my or even the church's understanding of God, but the revelation of God I've received has come through Jesus and so I am going to preach Jesus because that's what I understand."

So, if that's the Exclusivist position of a theology of religions, it stands to reason that there's an Inclusivist position and indeed there is. The Inclusivist position "affirms *both* the saving presence of God in all religious traditions *and* the full, definitive revelation of God in Jesus Christ" (Kimball, p.203). Now how in the world does it do that, you might be asking. The reply to that, which is also the answer to the question of innocent children who die and the question of the person on the desert

island who never heard of God, is best encapsulated in this quote, *“Those, who through no fault of their own, do not know Christ or his church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation.”* The source of this quote might shock you. It comes from a document called *Lumen Gentium*, or *Light to the Gentiles*, and was written by the Second Vatican Council. It, along with another document called *Nostra Aetate* (“*In Our Time*”) detailing how Roman Catholics are to approach non-Christian religions and written by Pope Paul VI in 1965, form the basis of the official Roman Catholic Inclusivist approach to a theology of religions. The metaphysical mechanics of the inclusivist approach, in as much as we might be able to explain them, suggest that it is the Second Person of the Trinity who accomplishes the work of salvation, regardless of what an individual calls that Savior. While it does have Scripture to back it, notably John 10:16, it has less scriptural support than the Exclusivist position.

The third way of thinking through a Theology of Religions is called the Pluralist approach. “*In my Father’s house there are many mansions,*” as

it says in the older translations. The pluralist position sees Christianity “neither as the only means to salvation nor as the fulfillment of other religious traditions. The pluralist position affirms the viability of various paths” (Kimball, p.205). This position can be ground in the work of one John Hick who has called for a “Copernican revolution” in the theology of religions, a revolution that removes the church from the center of the theological universe and puts God back in there. The idea there is that with God at the center, the religions revolve around and serve God, not the other way around. Early twentieth century Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran (of “The Prophet” fame) offered a sort of pluralist rallying cry when he wrote, *“I love you, my brother, whoever you are - whether you worship in a church, kneel in your temple, or pray in your mosque. You and I are children of one faith, for the diverse paths of religion are fingers of the loving hand of the one supreme being, a hand extended to all, offering completeness of spirit to all, eager to receive all.”*

Diana Eck, a scholar of the American religious landscape, said, *“Being a Christian pluralist means daring to encounter people of different faith traditions and defining my faith not by its borders but by its roots.”*

I offer you these three paths to a theology of religions today because before I learned about them, I wasn't aware there were different ways of thinking through this stuff. I found that as my physical world expanded, my spiritual thinking also needed to expand. Now, you have to think and pray your way to your position, but you needed to know what they were before you could do that. To echo another of my professors, I am a Christian and a member of the clergy. I have received the gifts of God through Christianity and I strive to "proclaim the mighty acts of him who called [me] out of darkness into his marvelous light," in the ways that I know how to do so. But I am only one human being in vast world full of human beings whose spiritual experiences differ from mine, and together we exist in a still vaster cosmos in which, to paraphrase the Bard, "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy." And so I have to believe that my experience of God cannot possibly exhaust the possibilities of God. In our Father's house are many dwelling places, and there are sheep that belong to other folds which Jesus says he must bring also. May they be as pleasantly surprised to find us there as I hope we will be to find them there.

Amen.