

Reinhold Bernhardt

Theological Perspectives on Interreligious Dialogue in Christianity

Within only a few decades the Christian view of other religions has undergone a radical change in the ecumenical movement.

The international missionary conference in Tambaram, India, in 1938 insisted that the biblical faith, based on God's encounter with humankind in Jesus Christ alone, is different from all other forms of religious faith (Hartenstein 1939). Karl Barth's Christocentrism, which was adopted by Hendrik Kraemer's missiology, created the theological foundation of this position. Kraemer's book *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (1938) became the preparatory study book for the missionary conference in Tambaram. He maintained that the only true way to know the revealed will of God is by responding to the divine intervention in history in Christ. As a consequence, there is a deep discontinuity between the gospel and other religious traditions. Even if Christianity as a religion is as human as any other in relation to God, it has a unique status in so far as it had become the vehicle through which the unique revelation of God is lived and proclaimed.

From a position like that, an interreligious dialogue can only have the purpose to give witness to the non-Christians about the unique revelation of God in Christ. As Paul Knitter (1985, 142) once put it, it is a dialogue between an elephant and a mouse.¹ Regarding the truth, it is a 'one-way-traffic'. The divine truth is mediated only through Christ and received only in the Christian faith. The Holy Scriptures of other religious traditions need to be conceived as human attempts to strive for divine truth, but those attempts are in vain.

But already at Tambaram there were dissenting voices (like those of A.G. Hogg, H.H. Farmer, T.C. Chao). They were convinced that there was a "two-way traffic" between God and the human soul" in the religious life and experience of non-Christians. "Thus, although the Tambaram report leaned heavily towards Kraemer's views, it acknowledged that 'Christians are not agreed' on the revelatory character of other religious traditions and identified this as 'a matter urgently demanding thought and united study' within the ecumenical movement" (Ariarajah 2002).

About 50 years later, the voice of the ecumenical movement sounded very different. The World Council of Churches (WCC) at their General Assembly in Canberra in 1991 issued a call to 'Reconciliation with Those of Other Religions'. I quote from the declaration:

1 Knitter (1985) refers here to: Henri Maurier: *The Christian Theology of the Non-Christian Religions*, *Lumen Vitae*, 21, 1976, 59, 66, 69, 70. In later publications Knitter changes the image and speaks of a 'dialogue' between a *cat* and a mouse.

The Bible testifies to God as sovereign of all nations and peoples as the one whose love and compassion include all humankind. We see in the covenant with Noah a covenant with all creation. We recognize God's covenant with Abraham and Israel. In the history of this covenant we are granted to come to know God through Jesus Christ. We also recognize that other people testify to knowing God through other ways. We witness to the truth that salvation is in Christ and we also remain open to other people's witness to truth as they have experienced it.

What is called for is a "culture of dialogue" as a way of reconciliation, a dialogue which overcomes ignorance and intolerance. – That is the position which is held by the WCC until today. In the 2002 issued „Guidelines for dialogue and relations with people of other religions“, § 15, the WCC declares:

We are witnesses in a world where God has not been absent and to people who do have something to say about God. We meet people who already live by faiths that rule their lives and with which they are at home. ... Christians need to open themselves to the witness of others, which is made not just in words but also in faithful deeds, in devotion to God, in selfless service and in commitment to love and non-violence.

The paradigm shift in the Christian theology of religions was brought forth by a number of historical developments which cannot be described in detail here. I will concentrate on the question on how the basic theological assumptions changed in that process. I would like to point out three theological concepts which made it possible to establish a dialogical theology of religions:

(1) First and foremost the widening of Christocentrism to a Trinitarian approach. The Trinitarian approach bears potential for a universal view on the revelatory presence of God in the world and thus in the history of religions. It allows to concede that one "cannot set limits to the saving power of God", as stated by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism in San Antonio 1989 (see Wilson, 1990, Section 1, § 26). It allows us to understand the plurality of religious traditions as the result of the manifold ways in which God has related to peoples and nations.

Especially the first and the third article of the creed – the belief in God the creator and in the Holy Spirit – point at God's universal presence. In a statement, worked out by a WCC working-group in Baar, Switzerland in 1990, it reads:

This conviction that God as creator of all is present and active in the plurality of religions makes it inconceivable to us that God's saving activity could be confined to any one continent, cultural type, or groups of peoples. A refusal to take seriously the many and diverse religious testimonies to be found among the nations and peoples of the whole world amounts to disowning the biblical testimony to God as creator of all things and father of humankind (WCC, Baar Statement 1990).

And then the Baar Statement quotes from a document of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism which says:

The Spirit of God is at work in ways that pass human understanding and in places that to us are least expected. In entering into dialogue with others, therefore, Christians seek to discern the unsearchable riches of Christ and the way God deals with humanity.

(2) The second theological concept which supports a dialogical theology of religions is the concept of covenant. The salvation history as witnessed in the Bible can be summarized and systematized as a history of different covenants which proceed from the universal to the specific. The Covenant with Noah was extending all over the whole creation. The Covenant with Abraham was much more restricted in its scope: It can be interpreted as including the Abrahamic religions, because the mythic origin of Islam is rooted in Ismael, the son of Hagar and brother of Isaac. The Covenant with Moses refers to the people of Israel. And the so called 'new' Covenant in Christ incorporates the non-Jews into the chosen people.

If the relation between the different covenants is not understood in an exclusive way so that the later invalidates the earlier, but in an inclusive way so that the later specifies but also confirms the later, then a dialogical relation to the adherents of other covenants can be promoted. In relation to Judaism, this move from an exclusive to an inclusive theology of covenant has made it possible to overcome the age-old model of substitution of the so called old covenant by the new covenant.

There are even voices in Judaism and Islam which claim that there is a plurality of covenants with different people. In his book *Opening the Covenant – A Jewish Theology of Christianity* (2008), Michael S. Kogan advocates a 'multiple revelation theory'.

(3) The third theological concept which supports a dialogical theology of religions refers to Christology. As we saw in dealing with the Christocentrism of Barth and Kraemer, there are forms of Christology which do not lead to dialogical theology of religions, but to exclusive truth claims. On the theological level it matters a lot if one focuses on Paul's proclamation of the "word of the cross and the resurrection" as decisive for the justification of the believers or if Jesus Christ is understood as the universal Logos of God, which "was in the beginning with God" (John 1:1) and which "was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (John 1:9).

A Christology which derives from a universalism, as developed by the gospel of John, probably will pave the way for interreligious dialogue more effectively than a Christology which proceeds from Paul's focusing on the centrality of the cross. That may explain why Protestants with their emphasis on the theology of the apostle of Paul tend to be more hesitant to dispose their faith in mutual openness to believers of other faith traditions.

And even within Protestantism there are differences. While the Lutheran tradition emphasizes that the logos has become a human being, the reformed tradition claims that in Jesus Christ the logos performed an "assumption of the flesh". As a consequence, the Lutheran theology focused more clearly on Jesus Christ as the one and only self-mediation of God while re-formed theologians like Zwingli were

open to think that God could have manifested his spirit even outside the revelation in Christ, for example in Greek philosophers.

I will not go deeper into these Christological debates now. I intended only to show how different ways of understanding Jesus Christ in his relation to God leads to different approaches of theology of religion. And those different approaches correlate with different attitudes towards non-Christian religions on the theological level.

For establishing interreligious relationships characterized by mutual respect, theological reflections do not seem to be of primary importance. More important seemingly are ethical, social and even political considerations. Pragmatic interests of coexistence seem to be most important. But we should not neglect the role of religious attitudes and theological reflections as a disposition of interreligious relations. If my faith makes me certain that my way to God is the only valid way, ethical, social and even political considerations will not have the power to lead me into real dialogical relationships with adherents of other religions. To be prepared for a dialogical openness it needs not only openheartedness on a psychological level but also a religious mind-set which supports (or at least not suppresses) such an attitude.

Thus I regard it as one of the biggest merits of the research project “Religion and Dialogue in modern Societies” (ReDi) to bring the two dimensions together: the practical and the theological; dialogue of religions and theology of religions.

The discussions inaugurated by Samuel Huntington have shown that not only economic and political factors are driving forces in forming interreligious relations (and conflicts!) but also religious and cultural factors. Interreligious dialogue is not primarily a practice of conversation but first and foremost an attitude of relating oneself to the religious other. For a religious believer, that attitude originates from the centre of his/her religious self-understanding. I am sure that the project “Religion and Dialogue” will help to shed more light upon the interrelation between the practice of interreligious dialogue and its theological conditions of possibility. I hope and wish that this project may be on its course under full sail with a fair tailwind.

References

- Ariarajah, S. Wesley (2002): *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement article on Interfaith Dialogue*. Available online at the World Council of Churches’ website: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/interreligious-trust-and-respect/ecumenical-dictionary-interfaith-dialogue> [4.11.2014].
- Hartenstein, Karl (1939): *Die Weltmissionskonferenz Tambaram 1938*. Stuttgart, Basel: Evangelischer Missionsverlag.
- Knitter, Paul F. (1985): *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions*. Maryknoll (N.Y.): Orbis Books.

- Kogan, Michael S. (2008): *Opening the Covenant. A Jewish Theology of Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kramer, Hendrik (1938): *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. New York: Harper.
- Wilson, Frederick. R. (Ed.) (1990): *The San Antonio Report. Your Will Be Done: Mission in Christ's Way*. Report on the World Council of Churches' Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, Geneva 1989.
- World Council of Churches, Baar Statement (1990): „Theological Perspectives on Plurality”. <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/christian-identity-in-pluralistic-societies/baar-statement-theological-perspectives-on-plurality> [4.11.2014]
- World Council of Churches, General Assembly in Canberra (1991): Report of Section III: „Spirit of Unity – Reconcile your people”, C.1: <http://oikoumene.net/eng.home/eng.global/eng.canberra91/eng.canber.2.7/index.html> [4.11.2014].
- World Council of churches, Central Committee (2002): „Guidelines for dialogue and relations with people of other religions”: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/2002/guidelines-for-dialogue-and-relations-with-people-of-other-religions> [4.11.2014]