

MAJOR TRENDS IN MODERN THEOLOGY

Inter-religious Dialogue in Modern Theology

In the Preface to their massive volume on *The Modern Theologians*, David Ford and Rachel Muers note that one of the primary aims of the individual chapters of this book is to encourage “dialogue and argument.”¹ Dialogue is important for modern theologians. It constitutes one of the major trends of modern theology. And within this broader sphere of dialogic activity, there is a great deal of concern that is specifically directed toward *inter-religious* dialogue; that is, conversing with adherents of non-Christian religious traditions.² Sometimes this can serve a beneficial purpose.³ However, such dialogues have also tended to

¹ David F. Ford and Rachel Muers, “Preface,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, ed. David F. Ford and Rachel Muers, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), viii.

² To list just a few of many texts which bear upon this issue, one might consult the following: Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); M. Darrol Bryant and Frank K. Flinn, *Interreligious Dialogue: Voices from a New Frontier* (New York: International Religious Foundation and Paragon House Publishers, 1989); Harold G. Coward, *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions* (New York: Orbis Books, 1985); Gavin D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions* (New York: Blackwell, 1986); Gavin D’Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990); Gavin D’Costa, *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Paul J Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991); John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Oneworld, 1993); John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995); Franklin Hamlin Littell and George Estreich, *The Growth of Interreligious Dialogue, 1939-1989: Enlarging the Circle* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989); Robert B. Sheard, *Interreligious Dialogue in the Catholic Church Since Vatican II: An Historical and Theological Study* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987); Leonard J. Swidler, *After the Absolute: The Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

³ For example, such dialogue could perhaps result in an adherent of a non-Christian religion converting to Christianity (see Timothy C. Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002], 16). In addition, such dialogue could possibly play an important role in world peace (see Ford and Muers, “The Modern Theologians,” x).

reinforce, in the minds of many people, a rather uncritical acceptance of religious pluralism (i.e. the view that all the major world religions are equally valid ways to “God” or the ultimate divine reality).⁴

How did this situation come about and when did modern theologians begin to take an interest in inter-religious dialogue? If we think of inter-religious dialogue in typically modern terms, as conversations, often predicated upon an acceptance of religious pluralism and usually aimed at gaining a deeper understanding (and even appreciation) for the religious uniqueness and distinctiveness of the “other,” then in many respects the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can be looked upon as an age of opposition to inter-religious dialogue. As Kenneth Scott Latourette reminds us, this was a time in which Christendom was threatened by the militaristic spread of Islam, and in which missionaries were often barred from entering countries such as China, India, and Japan in order to propagate the Christian faith.⁵ Moreover, the crusades and Inquisition were revived during this era, and Protestants and Roman Catholics regularly killed one another in the wars of religion.⁶ It seems evident, then, that this was not an age of inter-religious dialogue in the modern sense of the term.

With the advent of the Enlightenment, however, things began to change. Immanuel Kant inaugurated a “Copernican revolution” in philosophy by assuming that the objects of our experience “must conform to our cognition.”⁷ In other words, innate categories of the human mind help construct the world of our experience. Over time, as those influenced by Kant gained a

⁴ This is noted by Gavin D’Costa in “Theology of Religions,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, ed. David F. Ford and Rachel Muers, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 627-29.

⁵ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Reformation to the Present*, vol. 2, Revised. (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1975), 689-96.

⁶ Roland H Bainton, *Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), 136-51.

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J.M.D. Meiklejohn, 2nd ed. (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1934), 12.

greater understanding of other cultures, they came to see “that in many respects human beings have constituted their worlds quite differently”—including their religious worlds.⁸ One result of this was a greater scholarly interest in, and even appreciation for, the religions of other peoples.

Another important thinker who contributed to our present age of religious pluralism and inter-religious dialogue was Friedrich Schleiermacher. Livingston describes him as carrying out “a ‘Copernican revolution’ in theology as consequential as Kant’s revolution in philosophy.”⁹ Schleiermacher defined the essence of religion or piety as “the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or, which is the same thing, of being in relation with God.”¹⁰ Although Schleiermacher held Christianity to be supreme among the world’s religions, he also believed that this “feeling of absolute dependence” could be experienced by adherents of non-Christian religions *to one degree or another*.¹¹ In light of this, it is not hard to see why those influenced by him (which essentially amounts to the whole of theological liberalism) would be open to appreciative, non-proselytizing dialogue with adherents of other faiths. For if the essence of religion is a “feeling” or “experience” that we all share more or less in common, then the

⁸ John B. Cobb, Jr., “The Religions,” in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, ed. Peter Crafts Hodgson and Robert Harlen King (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 361. An excellent example of this on the contemporary scene can be found in the religious pluralism of John Hick. According to Gavin D’Costa, “Hick developed a Kantian-type distinction between a divine noumenal reality ‘that exists independently and outside man’s perception of it’ which he calls the ‘Eternal One,’ and the phenomenal world, ‘which is that world as it appears to our human consciousness,’ in effect the various human responses to the Eternal One” (D’Costa, “Theology of Religions,” 628-29). For a fuller account, in Hick’s own words, see John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 233-51.

⁹ James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment And the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (Fortress Press, 2006), 93.

¹⁰ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. Hugh Ross Mackintosh and James Stuart Stewart, vol. 1, English translation of Second German Edition. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 12.

¹¹ See *Ibid.*, 1:31-39. However, it’s important to note that Schleiermacher did *not* view the religious experience of Christians and non-Christians as identical. Hence, in another context he observed that “the exact duplicate of inner religious experience typical of Turks or Indians cannot exist among Christians.” See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. John Oman, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper, 1958), 95.

doctrinal differences of the various world religions can be viewed largely as different ways of describing this common experience.¹²

Finally, as we move into the twentieth century, we must briefly consider how the work of Ernst Troeltsch has contributed toward the modern trend of inter-religious dialogue. Although Troeltsch initially held, like Schleiermacher before him, that “Christianity is the highest and most significantly developed world of religious life that we know,” he would later come to adopt a much more relativistic position.¹³ Shortly before his death, he described the major world religions as all “tending in the same direction.” Although Christianity may be *true for us*, it is not necessarily true for everyone. And because of this, as we make our way through life we must recognize that “the Divine Life is not One, but Many,” and that “to apprehend the One in the Many constitutes the special character of love.”¹⁴

In our own day, of course, religious and theological pluralism abound.¹⁵ For theological liberals, this is a cause for rejoicing—and dialogue. Indeed, it is through the process of inter-religious dialogue that new ways of thinking about and relating to God are opened up to us.¹⁶ For this reason, inter-religious dialogue occupies a very important place in modern theology. This can be seen in the work done by Stanley Samartha for the World Council of Churches in the 1970s, as well as in the writings of contemporary pluralist scholars such as Wilfred Cantwell

¹² For some of Schleiermacher’s own thoughts along these lines see *On Religion*, 99-102.

¹³ Ernst Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, trans. David Reid (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1971), 117. See also the helpful discussion of these issues in James C. Livingston et al., *Modern Christian Thought: The Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 20-23.

¹⁴ Ernst Troeltsch, “The Place of Christianity Among the World Religions,” in *Christian Thought: Its History and Application*, ed. Friedrich Hügel (London: University of London Press, 1923), 32, 35. See also the brief discussion of Troeltsch to this same effect in Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, “Introduction,” in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 8-9.

¹⁵ David Tracy describes this as a “truism.” See David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Smith, John Hick, Gordon Kaufman, David Tracy, and Paul Knitter (to name a few).¹⁷ It can also be seen in the work of inclusivist scholars such as Karl Rahner and Clark Pinnock, as well as the documents of Vatican II relating to this issue.¹⁸ Finally, even some exclusivists have shown themselves to be keenly interested in taking part in inter-religious dialogue.¹⁹

To sum up, then, it seems clear that inter-religious dialogue is a major trend in modern theology. Although some might see this as unfortunate, it does not necessarily have to be so. After all, as Christians, we want to be in conversations with Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, and so forth. We are to be actively seeking to make disciples of all the nations (Matt. 28:19). The problem with much contemporary inter-religious dialogue, at least from an evangelical perspective, is not that such conversations are taking place. It is rather that they are so often taking place in a context dominated by religious pluralism. But as Timothy Tennent points out, adopting a pluralistic perspective is hardly necessary for genuine dialogue to take place.²⁰ Evangelical exclusivists can participate in respectful dialogue without in any way compromising the uniqueness of the Christian message. Indeed, we have been called to do so.

¹⁷ See, for example, Stanley J. Samartha, ed., *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1979); Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981); John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Gordon D Kaufman, *God, Mystery, Diversity: Christian Theology in a Pluralistic World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

¹⁸ Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 121-31; Clark H Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); Walter M. Abbott and Joseph Gallagher, eds., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder, 1966).

¹⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable*.

²⁰ Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable*, 14-16.