

SYNCRETISM AND THE QUEST FOR INTERIORITY

An Issue facing the World Council of Churches at Addis Ababa

(Paul Verghese)

"All religions lead by differing paths to the same God". This statement generally signifies the common ethos of all East Asian religions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism. "There is no God but Allah; Mohamed is the prophet of God".

This seemingly intolerant statement seems characteristic of West Asian religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam. And all universal religions are of either East Asian or West Asian origin.

Is there a meeting place between exclusivism and tolerance in religion? This question bids fair to set off a few minor explosions in the January meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, of the World Council of Churches' Central Committee.

Calvin, like Augustine from whom he draws his main cues, belongs strictly to the west Asian tradition of intolerance. The God of the Old Testament is a jealous God. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the only means of salvation ordained by God. When the pagan Nectarius of Calama wrote to St. Augustine at the beginning of the fifth century to suggest that non-Christians who live good lives may be admitted to the Kingdom of God, the reply was vehemently in the negative. For Augustine, outside God's grace, anything that springs from man is ipso facto sinful. The apparent virtues of the pagans are but splendid vices.

Would that wash today when we talk about secular Christianity and affirm the work of God outside the Church in the secular world? Most western thinkers seem to exhibit a kind of inconsistency at this point. God is at work in the secular, of that they seem to be sure. But is he at work also in the other religions? Western Calvinist thought has not moved much beyond Hendrik Kraemer at that point.

The great watershed is the International Missionary Conference in Tambaram, Madras, India, in ~~1929~~ 1930. There over against some who tried ~~af~~ to affirm some measure of continuity between the other religions and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, whether it be as preparatio evangelica or not, Kraemer gave utterance to the doctrine of absolute discontinuity. Later on, his master-work The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World set out the view in greater detail and with impressive Biblical documentation, that God may work outside the realm of Biblical revelation, but since no criteria are available by which to discern what is authentically of God, we can only conclude that the non-Christian religions are simply "great human achievements". In good neo-Orthodox theology that simply means plain no good. For the human is outside the realm of grace and therefore sinful. According to Kraemer only Calvin, Luther and Hamann were the only true theological interpreters of the Gospel who took the whole Bible seriously and therefore saw clearly that nothing good could come from outside the realm of Biblical revelation.

If you are an academic stickler for fine points of detail, you would argue that Kraemer later changed his point of view in his later work Religion and the Christian Faith. Yes, of course he changed. His latest point of view was that the religious consciousness is the place of man's dialectic encounter with God, but that outside the realm of Biblical Revelation the dialectic has largely negative results, or that even in those cases where there are some positive results, the positive is so distorted as to be almost negative in effect.

Kraemer's countryman and fellow Dutch Calvinist Dr. Visser 't Hooft gave expression to substantially the same view in his polemic against syncretism: No Other Name. It is his influence that has kept the World Council of Churches till now from an honest study of the other religions.

The western fear of syncretism is a fact to be reckoned with, especially among continental theologians of traditional Lutheran and Calvinist schools. These theologians are genuinely afraid of the large-scale interest in Yoga and Eastern religions among western people, especially the young. Emil Brunner had already ~~made~~ in the ~~22~~ thirties made the statement that the Gospel has no rivals among the great religions of the world, but that mysticism still constitutes the one great rival of the Word.

Why are these theologians so scared of mysticism? There seem to be three fears. First that in mystical union the soul loses its separate identity and merges in the infinite. The western notion of the individual was the consequence of a long and hard struggle, so much so that even today there are some who regard the worth of the individual as the central tenet of the gospel of Jesus Christ. To lose this hardwon individual identity in the infinite is a prospect which sends most western minds giddy.

The second fear is that in mystical union man finds unmediated access to God and thereby renders the Mediator Jesus Christ superfluous. The mystics of all religions claim that there are common elements in their experience. If this is so, then the mystical experience in other religions would be regarded as having salvific effect outside of Jesus Christ. This would be a betrayal of the gospel.

The third fear is about the future of mission. The urgency for preaching the gospel to non-Christians is powered by the conviction that there is salvation in none other name. If the other religions are also recognised to be capable of saving man, then there is no longer any rationale for preaching the gospel to adherents of these religions.

What worries one in examining these fears, is the greater fear that underlies these ~~three~~ three fears, the fear of truth. If the gospel is true, then shall we close our eyes to the phenomena of other religions, just because they pose a threat to the security of our ~~faith~~ faith? Is such an insecure faith worth having? Those of us who take a different view on such matters think that Kraemer has fundamentally misled the protestant churches. If Christians had not been so quick to shut their eyes to the truth of other religions, they may have come to a different understanding of the gospel ~~itself~~ itself. And in this time when even Harvey Cox admits that religionless Christianity was not such a hot idea after all, we need to look a little more seriously into the other religions in order to be reminded of certain elements in the Christian tradition which we are nowx tending to overlook. The quest for inner peace in meditation and Yoga points to a basic need which the neo-Orthodox interpretation or the neo-pietist Bultmannian interpretation has failed to meet.

To us it is a test of the sincerity of western Christians when they claim that they do not wish to dominate the theological scene with their problems, whether they are willing to take the religious world as seriously as the secular world. A very mild and reasonable proposal for a less reserved approach to dialogue with other religions will come up before the Central Committee in January. The response to this proposal on the part of the theological powers that be should provide an interesting, and I hope, illuminating spectacle.