

## Chapter 9

# PLURALISM: THE RELATIONSHIP OF THEOLOGY TO RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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Pluralism is, I believe, a matter of absolutely primary importance for theologians, philosophers, students of religion, and human beings, because human and religious experience is irremediably pluralist. But pluralism has come to have so many forms and meanings which require to be distinguished rather carefully if their consideration is not to become hopelessly confused. My intention in this paper is to consider one quite limited, almost methodological, aspect of the subject by focusing on two rather closely linked developments within the recent intellectual history of the Christian West: one, the transformation of university departments of "theology" into departments of "religious studies" (either by change of name or effectively); the other, the proposed transformation of Christian theology itself, with its hitherto irreducible core of particularism, into a pluralist "world theology" which gives no centrality or primacy to any specific religious tradition of revelation or salvation. The latter is, of course, particularly connected with names like John Hick and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. These two developments have gone very closely together, the one often appearing as the justification of the other. They might well be claimed to represent collectively the most characteristic contribution of the late 1960s and 70s to the theological area of study.

I will begin with what might be called, a little simplistically, an attempt to delineate the *Sitz im Leben* of John Hick's *God and the Universe of Faiths*.<sup>1</sup> The establishment of a *Sitz im Leben*, as should be obvious (but it often is not), in no way demonstrates the truth or falsity of an idea, but understanding is undoubtedly helped by the contextualization of its genesis. The book was published in 1973 and represents the most influential example in this country of the rewriting of Christian theology to accommodate the apparent requirements of a religiously pluralistic world. It is of course closely paralleled by the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith<sup>2</sup> in America, among others. To understand this exercise, and the apparent need

for it, it seems to me helpful to consider the cultural world which had finally broken up a few years previously. It was not, strange as it may seem in retrospect, a pluralistic world. It is true that beginning with the seventeenth century, at least, the West was laying the intellectual and religious foundations for pluralism. It is true also that for two hundred years the British Empire had straddled cultures and faiths with, on the whole, remarkable tolerance and aplomb: India could not have been ruled otherwise. But it was only, and very deliberately, tolerance up to a point. Indian culture and religion, it was officially agreed, were good enough for Indians, but they were not something fully open to an Englishman—however affectionate a Kipling or a Forster, at least, might be towards them. The underlying tragedy of *A Passage to India* lies precisely therein. Indian culture and society could be a tourist attraction, but it would be very dangerous for all concerned if they became more than that.

The Victorian model coupled a worldwide empire and commerce with the most emphatic commitment, explicit or implicit, to the mental, moral, and religious primacy of Western man, conceived in a unitary and rather missionary way. Despite the growth of a multiplicity of denominations, a pluralism of public experience was not significantly reflected in a pluralism of world view but rather in an unquestioning consciousness of superiority, guaranteed by printing press and gun, railroad and telegraph. Perhaps there was no other way in which Europe's political domination could have been appropriately justified or motivated. If a diversity of culture and religion was all the same admitted, it was then not on a fully pluralistic basis but on a strictly two tier model: ours and theirs, and never the twain shall meet.

Ours was not as such necessarily Christian—or at least it did not remain so. Take that much-used nineteenth century phrase “civilization and Christianity.” For some people the one took primacy, for some the other. The missionary, expatiating upon the power and wealth of Queen Victoria's empire to a bemused petty African potentate, might wave the Bible before him and declare impressively, “Here is the explanation of Britain's greatness,” but the late Victorian mind was increasingly regarding the Christianity element in the package as expendable, and for some colonial officials it was just a nuisance. One remained no less firmly convinced of the inherent superiority of Westernness.

Certainly the typical missionary, lay theologian, or person in the pew rather easily equated the most particularist claims of Christianity, of Christ, of Bible, the “*solus*” of Reformation theology, with the inner principle of the West's primacy, the conclusive reason why Britain was *super omnes*. England's providential role, declared Frederick Temple, at the time a young man, but later to be Archbishop of Canterbury, was “the sublimest position ever occupied by any nation hitherto, that of the authoritative

propagator of the Gospel over the world.”<sup>3</sup> The theological and religious particularism always inherent in the Christian gospel took on or coalesced with, in the context of the nineteenth century, this world-embracing Western cultural particularism of political, even racial, domination—a domination which would not exterminate other breeds and faiths, but regulate them, study them conscientiously, hopefully perhaps in due course convert them. *Christus vincit* melted into “Britannia rules the waves” and the more confident one was in the inherent superiority of Victoria’s Britain, the more affected one might be both with a high sense of protectionist duty towards lesser breeds and by the call of the student Christian’s new watch-word “The evangelization of the world in this generation.”<sup>4</sup>

Of course I am simplifying, even perhaps caricaturing a little, the world view of our ancestors—the world view in which at least some of us were still brought up. But not too greatly. In the first half of the twentieth century it was expressed less crudely and less confidently, yet it survived and, indeed, a large working empire continued to require it as a sort of civil religion. The final collapse of this civil religion came only after the Second World War and even then not too quickly. But the conditions which both needed and stimulated it were rapidly disappearing. The economic and political decline of Britain in particular was obvious. By the mid-1960s the Empire had virtually disappeared. The United Nations had generated a new ethos of egalitarian international relations. Japan, China, Indonesia, India, and Pakistan were major powers. Christianity had lost such worldwide political significance as it possessed prior to the 1939–45 war. Even within Europe the struggle between religion and secular humanism which had continued within the Western tradition for many generations seemed to have reached a new phase in the ever more apparent triumph of the latter.

The 1960s were the decade in which the customary ideology of the West became manifestly unnecessary and hence patently absurd. It happened coincidentally, but perhaps not wholly coincidentally, with other, less easily to be anticipated, cultural revolutions: a general deriding of structure and tradition, a discovery of permissiveness, community, and experience: culture-free, gender-free, race-free.<sup>5</sup> The quintessential qualities of the sixties seemed everything that the Victorian spirit was not. This transformation, partially but by no means wholly ephemeral, was made a great deal more complex for Britain by an extra but not unrelated development—the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Caribbean and Asian immigrants, the latter bringing their own non-Christian religions. Britain itself was becoming religiously a highly pluralistic society in which Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, and Buddhist communities were important, just at the time when its Christian commitment was, at least in numerical terms, declining more rapidly than

in any previous decade of the century, and just, too, as the old model of a two-tiered humanity was disappearing as absurd.

Western people had lived hitherto—even, paradoxically, if they lived in India or Malaysia—in an essentially unpluralistic society and that society was motivated by an unpluralistic Western religion, whether Christian or liberal humanist, the two accommodately interwoven. All that was now over. In the sixties our Western world became stridently pluralist. The model was no longer Eton but California. Strangely enough, just as the traditionally unitary and missionary West turned in aspiration pluralist and undogmatic, much of the rest of the world began to move with almost equal suddenness and even cruelty towards unitary, anti-pluralist models. The late 1960s can be seen as a crucial moment for both developments. So much so, in fact, that Western society's rather hastily embraced pluralist ideals, intended especially to accommodate the religions of Asia, could create new grounds for suspicion for others rather than any obvious bridge. It is within an almost worldwide anti-pluralist surge that the modern Western concern for pluralism must be assessed.

In the late 1960s, however, that was not evident and the newly perceived cultural pluralism of the West could well be seen as standing in need of a civil religion grounded in an appropriate theology. No faith should be established, yet each should be accorded appropriate respect and drawn into the functions that society asks of civil religion. There was an implicit need of an intellectual framework for the new religious order, even if that order could not fully be brought into being all at once. The interrelationship of religions could, of course, be looked at in purely secular sociological or historical terms, even in Marxist ones, but to a religious sympathizer such terms would be reductionist and demeaning. Civil religion and the theology behind it must not be that. Parallel approaches to a number of different religious traditions must inevitably generate institutions which are in principle religiously pluralist—that is to say, orientated sympathetically to religion in general but to no specific religious tradition in particular. For such approaches and institutions to be genuinely attractive to believers themselves, it could then be argued that they ought to be justified not in merely secular terms but in those of an overarching theology, an umbrella religious outlook, a “global human theology” as Hick called it,<sup>6</sup> in terms of which all these various religions could intercommunicate and, in good Durkheimian manner, contribute religiously to the onward march and moral health of the contemporary city. That, I take it, forms a large part of the agenda behind Hick's *God and the Universe of Faiths*. Of course he did not, and doubtless does not, see it quite like that. It would indeed be socially reductionist to see it merely like that. The point is that a consciously pluralist theology looked appropriate to the contemporary

context, especially to the context of Birmingham. Hick in all honesty stressed that the whole subject of the relation between Christianity and other religions was one he had “largely ignored until coming to live . . . in the multi-cultural, multi-colored, and multi-faith city of Birmingham and being drawn into some of the practical problems of religious pluralism”.<sup>7</sup> This is precisely it. As a result of this experience he found it personally no longer possible to maintain a Christ-centered or “one’s own-religion-centered” theology. Instead he made what he called his “Copernican revolution” to a God-centered or, later, a “reality-centered” theology. He tells us that “for at least twenty-five years” he had believed that “those who do not respond to God through Christ are not saved but, presumably, damned or lost.”<sup>8</sup> “I believed by implication that the majority of human beings are eternally lost . . . this was the position in which I was for a number of years concerning the relation of Christianity to other religions . . . but as soon as one does meet and come to know people of other faiths a paradox of gigantic proportions becomes disturbingly obvious”<sup>9</sup>—the paradox that these people are far too good to be “lost.” Hick, of course, went on to reexamine traditional Christian theology, criticize it, and develop his own “human” or “global” theology. But I do not think I am altogether mistaken in judging that for him the theological reanalysis was secondary and that it indeed looks rather weak in strictly theological terms. The “Copernican Revolution,” while claimed as a splendid clean fresh start, appears all the more confused the more you analyze it. The overwhelming impression I am left with is that for Hick the revolution was an experiential rather than a strictly theological one. He had previously lived in a Christian world and taken for granted a fairly simple Protestant Christ-centered view of salvation, doubtless more devotional than theological in essence and hardly thought out at all. Entering into a professorial role in a genuinely pluralistic world, he felt quickly compelled to discard this overly-simple and dubiously Christian evangelical view of salvation and damnation and create instead what he thought of as a new “global” theology. As he himself stressed, theology derives from a particular cultural situation. So it is not unfair to point out how very closely his own does so.

This was, similarly, the situation within which new university departments of religious studies suddenly flourished. The university department of theology, supported in the past as an honored part of a national university, itself maintained by public funds, was an appropriate—almost necessary—part of a religiously single world. It existed primarily to develop a coherent ongoing rationale for society’s dominant faith or ideology—in the case of Western Europe, some form of Christianity—and hence to service a major public profession, the church’s ministry. Theology was needed to relate church to society, and it was needed by both sides. From the 1960s,

however, such a department was increasingly anomalous. By theology I mean what it has traditionally meant, a discipline which is not merely concerned comparatively or historically with sacred scriptures and religious doctrines, including an understanding of man, but which does so from a position of faith. With due respect to Maurice Wiles, I remain unable to see how without faith one can have theology—a history of theology, yes, but theology itself, no. A department of Christian theology implies in principle staff and students working together from and within a common faith, though doubtless a vigorous department could reasonably carry, and indeed benefit from, the questioning challenges of the odd deviant. It seems to me perfectly proper in principle to have such a department. In an Islamic country a national university can appropriately maintain a department of Islamic theology; in a Christian country, a department of Christian theology. Indeed the absence of such a department was socially dangerous, the existence of a vigorous academic theology being the best defense against the dominance of irrational and intolerant fundamentalisms.

In reality, however, the one nation/one religion model has long been an anachronism almost everywhere, and the pursuit of it as an ideal in the pluralist reality of society may be a highly dangerous one. In a pluralist society a department of pure theology can only exist appropriately at a more private level, yet withdrawal from the public arena of a genuine university is likely, all in all, to be disadvantageous for theology—though it may still be the right, even the only, option in some circumstances. There can be little doubt that from the 1960s the department of Christian theology in Britain became less and less appropriate as a university institution. Our society as such no longer retains that degree of coherent Christian faith to require and justify university departments of specifically Christian theology, at least on the scale that they had existed hitherto. Nevertheless religion and churches (that is to say, communities of faith) remain an important reality of life, personally, nationally, and internationally. It requires study which is at once sympathetic and scientific, critical and constructive. Room is still needed for the construction of theologies—the rational critique of human life, material existence, political, religious, and social structures on the basis of the faith of significant minority communities. Such a critique is needed by society as much as ever, but it can only be done on the basis of a faith of some sort. As there is no more a majority faith in society, it must be done on the basis of one or more minority faiths. Certainly Christianity in Britain today has the right (in terms of social significance) as well as the capacity to mount a critical theology. Such a theology has no right to a university monopoly, but it has a right to be present there—and as something more than the mere systematizing of an individual's belief. Indeed society itself would be dan-

gerously the loser if influential religions within it were denied the opportunity to theologize effectively at university level and thus encouraged to fall back upon fundamentalism and quietism. The department of religious studies in which all this should now be done is as understandable a development of the post-1960s Britain as is the theology of Hick, yet while the one seems to me an absolutely true and necessary development, the other appears a superficially attractive but over-hasty misdevelopment.

Departments of theology, even where they retain the name, seem to be effectively transforming themselves into departments of religious studies. Most elements of a modern course of theology are in point of fact tackled with absolutely no necessary sense of religious commitment. Indeed the specifically theological element within a theology course in most English universities is now quite a small one—probably too small. This should not, however, mean that it is unimportant, nor that theology cannot exist, even flourish, within a department of religious studies, whether so-called or not. It can. But it does so on the basis of the work of individuals and groups, bringing their personal or community faith commitment creatively to enlighten one or another area of study. In much the same way it is not appropriate to have a department of Marxism, but many a Marxist works creatively within departments of history, sociology, philosophy or, indeed, religious studies. We may note here that if the subject of religious studies is in its scope very much wider than theology, theology also remains in its way very much wider than religious studies. Religious studies is, inevitably, the study of religion—all religion, including the relationship between religion and anything else. But theology is not, as such, necessarily about religion at all. It is about existence in its totality seen in the light of a faith. In the same way an appropriate department of religious studies in Britain today will be in principle pluralist, open to and, hopefully, containing Christians, Muslims, Jews, Marxists, agnostics. They are united, not in faith—as they should be in a department of theology—but in a serious concern with the phenomena and significance of religion in a wide sense and in recognized skill in studying and interpreting such phenomena from a variety of standpoints.

What exactly do we mean by pluralism from the viewpoint of religious studies? First, a recognition that the diversity of religions is a substantial, not a marginal, element within our subject, and that for an understanding of religion, it is crucial to consider the evidence of different traditions (including especially those outside ones own). Secondly, by pluralism in our discipline we must mean the principle that one religion is not to be systematically interpreted in terms of another, and that the department has no overarching principle of interpretations other than that of liberal scholarship. This does not mean that the comparison of religions is excluded,

nor even the criticism of one in terms of the theology of another, or any other appropriate terms, only that the department is not committed as such to any single religious or critical viewpoint. I cannot see any other way our subject can or should survive within universities in a society such as ours, however much it may be the case that in any one department all or most of the staff are in point of fact representative of a relatively small spectrum of belief. It seems sensible that in different departments the spectrum should be different.

It was natural enough, in the late 1960s and 1970s, that, as the department of theology turned effectively into a pluralist department of religious studies, and as its concerns with religious traditions other than the Christian grew considerably, there should have been a feeling, an expectation, that theology itself had to respond pretty drastically. In some way, indeed, it had to. The absence of serious consideration in nearly all post-medieval theology—to go no further back—of other religions and their significance vis-à-vis God, the human being, and Christ is obvious enough. The question really was, in what way should it do so?

Hick presents his “Copernican revolution” as the only appropriate intellectual development for a Christian theologian in the pluralist city. Is it? It would be dangerous to imagine that just because a particular intellectual development appears on the surface appropriate to a particular context, it is therefore the correct development, or that there may not be other perhaps less obvious but better grounded approaches. That Hick’s was truly in its way extremely appropriate in terms of cultural and social context, I have already tried to show. Was it, however, theologically appropriate? It is, quite obviously, necessary for Christian thinking to change in response to cultural change. Yet it is equally true that Christian thinking can be inappropriately hijacked by the spirit of the age into sudden developments alien to its own proper self. A Copernican revolution in theology can certainly not be finally justified in terms other than theological. This, of course, Hick fully recognizes and his arguments relate to the confused state—as he sees it—of the earlier theology of the relationship of Christianity to other religions (the number of “epicycles” it had, he argues, been forced to develop) in order to justify change.

The companion volume to *God and the Universe of Faiths* should undoubtedly be seen as the symposium *The Myth of God Incarnate*, edited by John Hick in 1977 after three years of preparation.<sup>10</sup> The aim of the book was to argue that the Incarnation, usually regarded as the centerpiece of specifically Christian belief and theology, the key component of Christianity’s distinctiveness, was no more than a myth and a myth which today, in “the new age of world ecumenism”<sup>11</sup> could very well be dispensed with. This, Hick’s Preface indicated, would have “increasingly important practi-



cal implications for our relationship to the peoples of the other great religions." No longer, Professor Wiles observed in the opening chapter, would Christians be able to believe in "the superiority of one religion over another in advance of an informed knowledge of both faiths. Such a change can only be regarded as a gain."<sup>12</sup> Jesus would no longer be claimed as in some way "the way for all peoples and all cultures," but as one of a number of powerful spiritual figures in human history who have taught the world about God. "We should never forget" Hick confidently declared, "that if the Christian gospel had moved East into India instead of West into the Roman empire, Jesus' religious significance would probably have been expressed by hailing him within Hindu culture as a divine Avatar and within the Mahayana Buddhism which was then developing in India as a Bodhisattva."<sup>13</sup> One wonders how he knows.

"A divine Avatar" or "a Bodhisattva." One among many: a guru within a pluralistic world. That was the intended message of the book and one suggested succinctly in the Epilogue by Dennis Nineham. Nineham summed up the matter, clear-sightedly enough, not in terms of the Incarnation but of the uniqueness of Christ. That too, no matter how it is expressed, would have to go. Now it is obvious enough that an explicit Incarnation-type theology is only one of the ways in which the New Testament writers endeavor to expound the mystery of Christ, and various writers in *The Myth of God Incarnate* correctly stressed this pluralism in New Testament theology as, of course, within subsequent Christian theology. Does the vocabulary of the Incarnation doctrine, either in its Johannine or its Chalcedonian form, speak to us today? Does it contain Christology *tout court*? Or is it just one way to talk about Christ among other ways? May we not use other ways? Of course, we may. But beneath such questions there is slipped in an essentially different one: do we need assert in any verbal form at all that Jesus is "necessarily in principle unique?"<sup>14</sup> The Hickian function of the book is to deny it—(though not all its contributors might have gone along with that denial). Now the book's appeal is intrinsically to Christian theological scholarship—an examination, principally, of the coherence of the Christian tradition's internal thinking in regard to Christ. Yet what it actually had to admit—as sound New Testament scholarship must admit—is that while the terms and images chosen for the formulation of Christ's religious uniqueness vary, the affirmation of that uniqueness can be found with basically equal weight in every New Testament writing as in all subsequent Christian creedal affirmation. That embarrassing claim to religious uniqueness on behalf of one man, Jesus of Nazareth, and a consequent ultimate universality of significance, have remained the central characteristic of the Christian tradition, formulate them as you will. Deny the uniqueness and defend Christianity as the appropriate folk-religion for

the European West, and you are, I would hold, denying Christianity intrinsically, however many bits and pieces of Christian wreckage you may still find serviceable. Maintain that uniqueness and universality, in whatever linguistic form, and you maintain the continuity and vitality of the Christian claim, however many bits and pieces you may discard as unserviceable.

That seems to me the heart of the matter. Christian theology can only function as such in accordance with Christianity's own central internal logic as a way of faith and of life. That logic is certainly not provable—the sound scholar can tackle the evidence with much good will and not find it adequately convincing, because the claims of that logic seem so improbable. But that is not theology, which remains and has to remain a discipline issuing out of a faith. It is philosophy, one form of common sense, religious studies, what have you. A theology operates according to its own awkward logic, a logic which functions rationally in judging probabilities, seeking coherence in systems, examining seemingly contrary statements, but all within the context of some great basic presupposition. All Christian theology, from the earliest Christian communities prior to the writing of the New Testament—insofar as we can know them—has operated on the basis of this great supposition, the qualitative uniqueness of Christ. No evidence of a pluralism, internal and subordinate to that unanimity, can possibly justify, in theological terms, an abandonment of that presupposition in favor of a quite different religious or secular world view. The attempt of Hick and of *The Myth of God Incarnate* to justify a rejection of that presupposition in favor of an ultimate religious pluralism within human history should be in principle a theological nonstarter. It must also, existentially, be destructive of Christianity as a coherent religious reality. It is a strange stipulation that, in order to enter the age of pluralism appropriately, you must first cease in principle to be what you have been for two thousand years. It is not one which makes theological sense (or sociological sense in relation to Christianity's ongoing community identity), and, equally, it should not be one required by the integrity of religious studies or a genuinely ecumenical approach to the situation of pluralism. That integrity requires, on the contrary, acceptance of the logically noncompatible claims of different religions, rather than the attempt to relate them all systemically within an imagined "world theology," which would be recognized by the believers of no tradition. I am arguing, then, for an explicit dualism: recognition of the quite different requirements of "religious studies" and "theology." For the former remark of Maurice Wiles is eminently correct: in religious studies we must, of course, not assert "the superiority of one religion over another." A department of religious studies could function on no other basis. But such a department operates in terms of a pragmatic secular liberal commitment to mutual respect in the pursuit

of learning, not in terms of an implicit or explicit theology of its own. This may seem to privatize theology, but there can be no alternative other than the setting up of a bogus "global theology" as a sort of civil religion for the department: bogus because it relates to no recognizable community of faith.

Essentially different are issues such as an adequate theological evaluation in Christian terms of the relationship of other religions, ideologies, and moral commitments to the uniqueness of Christ, or again the limits of creedal and denominational pluralism within the large historic tradition of Christian belief. The trouble with the Hickian and *Myth of God Incarnate* approach was that it mixed them all up. Such questions cannot, of course, be other than immensely important and their conclusions may well be significantly corrective for the thought and practice of the Christian community. Thus it should in fact be painfully evident that the very simple model of salvation through explicit faith in Christ alone, taken for granted by the younger Hick, was really not the central traditional Christian one at all—though doubtless it had been taken for granted over many generations by countless Christians, Protestant and Catholic. It is too evidently false to the full data of the tradition—including especially the explicit and breathtaking insight of Romans 5 that the grace of Christ has abounded more widely than the sin of Adam. Basic to the tradition was a tension between the every-frontier-breaking-down universality of salvation and the particularity of its symbolic personal initiator and centerpiece. The abandonment of neither is acceptable. Again, basic to the tradition was the relationship between Old Covenant and New, whereby the adherents of both were included within a single history of salvation "ab Abel," whether or not they knew anything of Jesus of Nazareth. Any appropriate advance in the Christian theology of salvation or of the relationship of religions might best start at this point. The fact is that *both* should, from the start, have ruled out a narrow "Christians only are saved" doctrine. It should not be too hard to evolve a theology of other religions and other scriptures, too, drawn from the paradigm of Israel, even if most theologians have failed to do so. Earlier covenants are at least an underanalyzed and underused category in theological thought. But such a development would remain an evolution, not a Copernican revolution and not an epicycle either. This would not be a pluralist theology but it would be a Christian theology open to the full pluralism of human experience and able to build upon a wide rather than a narrow model of divine revelation and the way of salvation.

Different again, of course, is the question as to whether, philosophically, belief in Christ remains a very plausible belief; or whether Christianity is not now a dissolving reality without a future, because without a sufficiently coherent set of beliefs with which a thoughtful twentieth cen-

ture person is able to identify. That, perhaps, was the true unwritten agenda for several of the *Myth of God Incarnate* writers. A theologian can well come, theologically, to such a conclusion: he or she may come to decide that it is impossible to construct any more a credible and coherent system upon the basic Christian presupposition, and thus come finally to cease to be a Christian theologian, because no longer a Christian. If Christian theology is based upon a false premise it should in due course wither, like many other dead ideologies and religious systems of the past. A theology, while grounded in faith, has still of its nature to establish an adequate and intellectually coherent and convincing system linking together a range of ideas relating to the basic aspects of contemporary human existence in the light of a central faith principle. This Christian theology has always tried to do and often effectively. If it can do so no more, it must crumble. But that is not a matter of pluralism, just one of the intellectual and spiritual senescence of a religious tradition.

It is manifest that an environment of radical pluralism must put a much greater strain upon the theologian, just as it does upon the ordinary believer, than an environment of shared belief. In the latter a scholar can easily tend to harmonize his or her conclusions with public faith without quite realizing he or she is doing so, in a way that simply ceases to happen when there is no longer a public faith of that sort. Such is the condition of modern Britain and such is, accordingly, the condition of a modern department and the discipline of religious studies, within which the academic theologian has now very largely to work. It can certainly be a strain to be loyal to the exigencies at once of religious studies and of a theology. Each, of course, has a variety of possible approaches to pluralism. A department of religious studies will then have to carry along with it an internal pluralism, including a plurality of attitudes towards pluralism itself. Indeed the tension of that plurality may be experienced within a single person. But such strains can be carried; indeed they have to be. In fact there is really no field of modern life and study in which a genuine loyalty at once to liberal and pluralist structures and to one's particular convictions, not shared with all one's colleagues, may not tax one's resources. It is really an unavoidable predicament. People who reject Christianity should not imagine that if they have principles and integrity they can escape it, though clearly some world views may seem more absurd in their scholarly consequences than others.

Today's is certainly a much harsher environment in which to assert the Christian claim to an absolute religious particularity than was the privileged bondage of the European past. Maybe it will prove too harsh and the battle will, quite quickly, be abandoned. But it should not, I think, be abandoned at the first moment that the new terms of service are read out, as the theologian recognizes around him or her a pluralist world instead

one of Christendom. He or she should have been more on guard, ready for the moment when the Christian claim would cease to be bolstered up by the claims of medieval or Victorian Christendom. After all, they did not start together. Christianity's nonpluralist commitment to the absolute particularity of Christ in relation to the ultimate meaning and purpose of humankind, God's will for the world, originated within a religiously pluralist world and among its poor, and triumphed in that world. Faced with a multitude of cults it was unyielding in relationship to them. The absolutist claims of Christianity were, one might suggest, masked rather than manifested in their true import by their subsequent connection with absolutist claims of Western culture and political power. Now that the latter have so largely collapsed, as has the connection between the two (though not in much current American ideological warfare, which unites a highly fundamentalistic Protestant Christianity extremely closely with American world power and "civilization," very much on a British Victorian model), it may well be an appropriate time precisely to speak forth the true scandal of Christian particularity in such a way that it can at least be heard for what it always claimed to be—the scandal of God's foolishness, not of British cleverness; of the weakness of the cross, not of the power of the maxim gun.

If the clever and the powerful of today's world have not time for such a message, seeking instead a more socially mellifluous new civic religion (inclusive or exclusive of God, "reality-centeredness," the tomb of the unknown soldier, Lenin's birthday, or whatever), it may be that the poor of the third and fourth world will think differently. Maybe they will be right to do so, finding in it indeed "the way, the truth, and the life," or maybe they will simply be missing out on the most reliable intellectual advances of the twentieth century in pursuance once more of an opium appropriate to their state of misery. In philosophical, historical, religious studies terms, we cannot quite say which is the case. And a pluralistic department of religious studies must be open to all the possibilities. But a theologian, operating loyally within such a department and the pluralistic world it reflects, will still—if he or she is able to stick to his or her last, at once believer and scientist—maintain that the Christian faith has always had at its heart a paradoxical assertion of the improbable, never contemptuous of reason, scholarship or other revelation, yet able again and again to outflank the broader ways of human wisdom and religion with the narrow particularity of a cross, a tomb, a tortured body, a resurrected hope, unique, yet every person's experience. Such an assertion is in some way fulfillment of every aspiration of the most pluralistic of worlds, yet it remains no less committed to a singularly single salvific model, one no less improbable in the first century than in the twentieth, but which for both may still—just conceivably—contain the power and the wisdom of God.

28. *Ibid.*, paragraph 7.
29. *Ibid.*, paragraph 7.
30. *Ibid.*, paragraph 8.
31. *Ibid.*, paragraph 13.
32. Sermon 39, "Catholic Spirit," paragraph 11, *Sermons*, 2:87.
33. *Ibid.*, paragraph 12-14, *Sermons*, 2:87-8.
34. *Works*, V:497f.; *Sermons*, 2:88f.
35. *Letters* (Telford), V:270.
36. *Works*, VI:205f.; Sermon 55, "On the Trinity," paragraphs 17-18, *Sermons*, 2:385.
37. *Works*, VI:296; Sermon 64, "The New Creation," paragraph 18, *Sermons*, 2:510.
38. *LRC*, paragraph 6, *Works*, X:81.
39. *Ibid.*, paragraph 7.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*, paragraph 8.
42. *Ibid.*, paragraph 4.
43. *Ibid.*, paragraph 17.
44. *Ibid.*, paragraph 16.
45. *Ibid.*, paragraph 17.
46. *Ibid.*, paragraph 16.
47. *Ibid.*, paragraph 13.
48. *Ibid.*, paragraph 16.
49. *Ibid.*, paragraph 13.
50. *Ibid.*, paragraph 7.
51. *Ibid.*, paragraph 9.
52. *Ibid.*, paragraph 13.
53. *Ibid.*, paragraph 15.
54. *Ibid.*, paragraph 9.
55. *Ibid.*, paragraph 10.
56. *Ibid.*, paragraph 6.
57. "Confessing One Faith," I/6-8; 21-34.
58. *LRC*, paragraph 14.
59. G.C. Cell, as quoted by Thomas C. Oden, *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1988), p. 82.
60. "Confessing One Faith," I/51; cf. I/43.
61. *Ibid.*, I/44.

## Chapter 9: Pluralism: The Relation of Theology to Religious Studies

1. John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973); see also his later *God Has Many Names* (New York: Macmillan, 1980); *The Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), and "Religious Pluralism," in *The World's Religious Traditions: Essays in Honor of Wilfred Cantwell Smith*, ed. Frank Whaling (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1984), pp. 154-64.
2. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1978); *Towards a World Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1981).
3. *Memoirs of Archbishop Temple*, ed. E.G. Sandford (London: Macmillan, 1906), p. 54.
4. Tissington Tatlow, *The Story of the Student Christian Movement of Great Britain and Ireland* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1933); H. Hans Hoekendijk, "Evangelisation of the World in This Generation," *International Review of Mission* (January 1970), pp. 23-31.
5. For an assessment of this see Part VI of Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920-1985* (London: Collins, 1986).
6. *God and the Universe of Faiths*, pp. 105 and 106.

7. Ibid., p. viii.

8. Ibid., p. 121.

9. Ibid., p. 122; cf. p. 100.

10. John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1977).

11. Hick's phrase, *ibid.*, p. 168.

12. Ibid., p. 9.

13. Ibid., p. 176.

14. Ibid., p. 202.

## Chapter 10: Reflections and Open Tasks

1. P. 79 in this volume.

2. For the following see M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

3. Fred Hirsch, *The Social Limits of Growth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 87.