CHAPTER 9

The Pluralist Path: Where We’ve been and Where We’re Going

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Introduction

In this chapter, I am to offer some help in reflecting on ‘the Pluralist Path’—where it has been and where it is going (or can go). The word ‘path’ is much too modest for what we are talking about. This ‘pluralist path,’ I would boldly claim, is really a Pluralist Reformation—a call for reform not only for Christians but for all men and women who want to describe themselves as religious, or spiritual. I use the word ‘reformation’ perhaps somewhat audaciously, but I do believe, appropriately. It is a call to clarify, correct, re-appropriate and so deepen what it means to call oneself spiritual or religious in this incredibly advanced and incredibly threatened twenty-first century world of ours.

This ‘Pluralist Reformation,’ I believe we can say, was, to a great extent, born and nurtured here on this beloved island of saints and scholars—and scoundrels. It is, largely, another reformation ‘made in England.’ The names of John Hick and Alan Race figure primarily among the early pluralist explorers and reformers. This chapter looks back on what Hick and Race started. In particular, I want to identify how this reformational pluralistic theology of religions developed through dialogue with its critics.

Let me begin with a procedure that I learned way back during my years of study in Rome at the Gregorian University, from 1962 to 1968. We began every thesis or new lecture with a definitio terminorum (definition of terms). I think that practice is particularly important for our topic, since many of the current descriptions of a pluralistic theology of religions that one finds in both the academic and popular media in no way fit most of the pluralists I hang around with. So let me make bold to offer six defining characteristics of the theology that mainstream pluralist theologians like Hick and Race are proposing:

1. **Pluralists affirm that many religions can be valid.** This means that many religions can offer human beings different ways of apprehending what is real and true and of living in harmony with what is real and true.
2. **Pluralists acknowledge and affirm that there are real, sometimes incorrigible differences between the religions.** But as pluralists, they want to not only recognize such stubborn differences but also to engage them.
3. Pluralists affirm—or better, they trust—that no matter how different religions are, there is that which connects them all and thus makes it possible that they can understand each other and challenge each other. This is not to affirm a ‘common ground’ or a ‘shared essence’ for all religions. But it does affirm that if we want to have any kind of a conversation between religions that will enable them to learn from each other, we have to have what Raimon Panikkar called a “cosmic trust” that there is a Mystery that connects them all (1985: 118–53).

4. The primary (though not only) criteria that pluralists invoke in order to ‘grade’ religions or to adjudicate the veracity of their claims are ethical rather than philosophical or theological. This of course, does not deny the necessary role of philosophical and theological reasoning.

5. Pluralists warn that no religion can hold itself up as containing the only or the superior or the final truth over all other religions.

6. Finally, a pluralist theology of religions seeks to lay the groundwork for a more authentic and life-giving dialogue among the religions. It seeks to promote not just the plurality of religions but the mutuality of religions. Its final goal is not tolerance but engagement.

**Vatican II: The Seedbed for a Pluralistic Theology**

So, where and when did this Pluralistic Reformation begin to take shape? I offer an answer that may be surprising in itself, but not so surprising in that it comes from a Roman Catholic theologian: the seeds of a pluralistic theology of religions were already planted in the fertile soil of the Second Vatican Council. But these seeds were sown by bishops who, as Karl Rahner has argued, did not fully realize what they were doing (1979). Let me explain.

While Vatican II clearly and boldly moved beyond the exclusivist theology that for the most part animated and guided the Catholic Church’s approach to other religions through most of its history, the Council still clearly remained within the borders of an inclusivist perspective. As never before in the history of Christianity, the value of other religions was recognized, especially in *Nostra Aetate*. But that value, in the end, was designated a “*praeparatio evangelica*” (preparation for the gospel), a stepping stone toward fulfillment in Christ and

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1 Or as Catherine Cornille has more recently expressed it: we have to trust that there is a connector behind or within the splendid, stunning differences among religions (2008: Chapter 3).