Chapter 13

Towards a Relational and Humanizing Theology: A Christian-Muslim Dialogue

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Introduction

The notion of ‘theology of religion(s);’ as it has been developed in the last decades, commonly refers to the self-reflection of a particular religious tradition (mostly, Christianity) when faced with religious pluralism. Alan Race used the expression ‘Christian theology of religions’ when in 1983 he introduced the oft-cited triad of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism (Christianity and Religious Pluralism, 1983). Whereas Jacques Dupuis (1997) aimed at ‘a Christian theology of religious pluralism;’ Harold Coward (2000) covered six religions when some years later he wrote about Pluralism in the World Religions. Paul Knitter moved from critically surveying ‘Christian attitudes toward the world religions’ (cf. the subtitle of No Other Name, 1985) to presenting ‘theologies of religions’ in a more general sense (Introducing Theologies of Religions, 2002—note the double plural).

Theologies of religions are created in response to religious pluralism—either in the form of traditional plurality (where different faiths coexist as entities that can be neatly separated) or modern pluralism (where the borders are more fluid). In the context of modern pluralism, traditional positions of dominion are challenged by modern ideals of equality and non-discrimination, and inherited stereotypes of the other are challenged by everyday interaction across religious divides and by interreligious friendships. All major religions have their own ways of dealing with traditional plurality. But modern pluralism poses different kinds of challenges, which cut deeper and have potentially more wide-ranging consequences for the religious traditions.

In what follows, I will reflect as a Christian theologian in dialogue with Islam. These two traditions cannot be neatly separated, intertwined as they are in history and contemporary societies. With regard to overarching theological reasoning, ‘Christianity’ (as an ecumenical whole) is certainly

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1 The following text is based on chapter 8 of the author’s book Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion (2014), with kind permission from Bloomsbury.
distinctively different from ‘Islam.’ But in the case of disagreement—be it ethical or theological—the fault lines do not coincide with the boundaries between the two religions.

Abandoning Supersessionist Claims?

Modern pluralism destabilizes traditional perceptions (ecumenical as well as interreligious ones) of the supremacy of one's faith, reflecting the fact that all major religions and confessions have been conceived in situations of conflict. Many theologians claim that, in the context of modern pluralism, traditional ideas of supremacy and supersession must be abandoned just as—in political terms—hierarchical models for multi-religious coexistence such as the Islamic dhimmi system must be replaced with equal citizenship. In an article from 2007, titled “My God is Bigger than Your God! Time for Another Axial Shift in the History of Religion,” Paul Knitter notes that theology is not just about God—it has also to do with earthly claims of superiority:

Religious people who make universal claims of superiority believe that it is God's will that, if not now then eventually, all people will become or should become members of their divinely constituted superior religion.... We come to what is for me the most impelling reason why the religions are being called to an axial shift regarding claims of superiority: the link between claims of religious superiority and privilege and calls to religious aggression and violence.

Knitter 2007: 103, 105

Critically aware of the potentially violent consequences of traditional claims of supremacy, Knitter calls for a shift from superior truth claims to what he calls ‘the mutuality model,’ in which “many true religions [are] called to dialogue” (Knitter 2002: 109ff.). He strongly believes that such an ‘axial shift’ is in fact possible, because of what he calls the mystical and the ethical-prophetic elements in all religions which—in his terminology—constitute ‘bridges' between religious traditions that may otherwise seem to be worlds apart.

Catherine Cornille, in her book The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue (2008), expresses a similar view when under the heading of ‘Interconnection’ she speaks of ethical issues as ‘common external challenges' and mystical traditions as 'common experience.' It is not clear, however, why Cornille sees ethical concerns such as sustainable development and alleviation of suffering