Afterword: Persisting with the Typology and Pluralism

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New Context of Interdependence

At Easby Moor, on top of the Cleveland Hills in North Yorkshire, and visible on a good day from my boyhood home some fifteen miles away, there is an obelisk with a plaque honoring the British explorer Captain James Cook (1728–1779). Cook was born at Marton-in-Cleveland and his boyhood home was at the village of Great Ayton which nestles below the hills. He was responsible for mapping the Pacific, New Zealand and Australia, thus radically altering western perceptions of world geography. The obelisk was erected in 1827 and the inscription reads:

In memory of the celebrated circumnavigator Capt James Cook F.R.S. A man of nautical knowledge inferior to none, in zeal, prudence and energy, superior to most .... While the art of navigation shall be cultivated among men, whilst the spirit of enterprise, commerce and philanthropy shall animate the sons of Britain, while it shall be deemed the honour of a Christian Nation to spread civilisation and the blessings of the Christian faith among pagan and savage tribes, so long will the name of Captain Cook stand out amongst the most celebrated and most admired benefactors of the human race.¹

That era has now passed. The colonialism it represented has been dismantled. No longer can we talk of “pagan and savage tribes” which are nothing more than labels of domination. No longer is the coupling of “civilization” and “the blessings of Christian faith” an easy marriage, for we are aware of the moral ambiguities which have accompanied such a coupling. We might admire the exploratory spirit of men like Cook, and there is every reason not to doubt his sincerity or integrity. But colonialism has passed.

There is a parallel argument to be made in respect of religious attitudes and religious colonizing. The obelisk demonstrates that other traditions have been imagined as “pagan and savage tribes,” ready to be supplanted by superior Christian faith. Moreover, in the case of Cook’s obelisk, Christian colonialism

¹ See http://www.captcook-ne.co.uk/ccne/cookie/gtayton.htm.
has gone hand in hand with economic and political colonialism, and indeed provided the latter with transcendent purpose.

As with post-colonial politics we now have post-colonial religion. We have entered an era of interdependence, religiously as well as politically. We have learned to let go the making of others in our own image and we now feel the pull to celebrate and not lament our differences.

The birth of interdependence—economically, politically and religiously—has been painful and continues to be so. There has been talk of a ‘clash of civilizations’ and the rise of religiously-motivated violence expressed through nationalist causes. Given that civilizations have been largely religiously shaped through history, is it possible to envisage a positive experience of interdependence without some equally positive articulation of what cultural and religious difference might entail? Hans Küng famously said that we need a global ethic to accompany our newly emerging sense of global interdependence (Küng 1991). We also need global spiritual vision to go with it.

Other commentators have labeled our postcolonial world as a new era of axial consciousness. For example Ewert Cousins, following the historian and philosopher Karl Jaspers, describes the evolutionary emergence of human individual awareness as being integral to the rise of the world religions as movements for transformation in the world. A split developed between ‘heaven’ and ‘earth,’ between ‘spirit’ and ‘matter,’ and it encouraged the idea of the subjective spiritual journey as we have come to know it. But now we are facing the dawn of a second axial period, whereby the fragmentation of consciousness is being transcended by global consciousness. The first axial period produced remarkable results with differentiated cultures and religions. With the shift towards convergence, Cousins writes of what this means for the religions:

Now that the forces of divergence have shifted to convergence, the religions must meet each other in center to center unions, discovering what is most authentic in each other, releasing creative energy toward a more complexified form of religious consciousness.

Cousins 2012: 75

The tasks and challenges of the theology of religions (ToR) fall within this larger dawning of a second axial period in history. Note this global consciousness will not be an undifferentiated, abstract form of life, but a more dynamic, because dialogical, form of consciousness. It will be concerned to recover some earlier dimensions of consciousness (such as ecological connectedness) but evolve to embrace a sense of interrelatedness between religions and cultures which hitherto has not been possible.