

The book starts with an introduction in which the author explains that the book is about the following question: ‘Can one combine openness and truth, plurality and identity, dialogability and steadfastness in the interreligious dialogue?’ (p. 1). In other words: is it possible to combine one’s faith commitment on the hand with openness on the other hand?

In the next chapter she delineates the ways of thinking of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. According to Moyaert all these three attitudes ultimately reveal a certain closedness. This is obvious in exclusivism, but it is less clear in inclusivism and pluralism. On the contrary, one would expect that pluralism is not closed at all. Nonetheless Moyeart is able to demonstrate that these two approaches also show a certain closedness. Inclusivism runs the risk of regarding the other religion from the perspective of one’s own religion, so that the danger exists that the otherness of the other religious tradition is not taken really seriously and that it is modelled on the framework of the own religion. Pluralism runs the same risk, because it sees the various religions as expressions of appearances of the same Real. The Real is the term John Hick (b. 1922) uses for God in the hope that by this concept he does justice to conceptions of transcendence in, for example, Buddhism. The problem with pluralism is that it is too much focused on the similarities of the various religions saying that only the concrete elements of these traditions, the ‘clothes’ are different. Many adherents of the various religious traditions will not agree with this view on their religion. Moreover pluralists have problems with the claim of many believers that only their own religion is true, a claim that is part of many religions, but is not really acknowledged by the pluralists. In other words, the views of the pluralists on the religions of the other outweigh the opinions of the very adherents of these religions. In fact, the pluralists are comparable to the king in the famous parable of the elephant and the blind men. He sees what the blind men do not observe, namely that they are all right, although their answers about what an elephant is differ completely (p. 88-89). In this way the pluralists turn out to have a claim on the truth themselves, an own perspective from which they themselves look at the various religious traditions.

Subsequently Moyaert discusses the cultural-linguistic theory developed by George Lindbeck (b. 1923). She indicates that Lindbeck’s main interest was ecumenism. For him the inter-religious dialogue was no more than a side issue. In his dealing with the various Christian traditions he emphasised the importance of intratextuality, the explanation of the core concepts of the Christian tradition by the texts themselves. In other words, if one wants to know who God is, she has to delve in the scriptures of Christianity. A helicopter view is impossible. One is always born in a certain language. In the same way one is also always born in a certain religious tradition. Only if one is completely absorbed in the Christian tradition, one will know who God is. The same is the case with people belonging to other religious traditions with regard to their religious backgrounds. Of course, one can translate the core concepts of some religion into the conceptual web of another religious
tradition, but then one will discover that every translation also leads to a certain loss of significance. It is impossible to translate, for example, the whole richness of the Christian concept of God into the conceptual language of another tradition. So, because of the un-translatability of religious concepts inter-religious dialogue is impossible.

After a very interesting interpretation of the story of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) based on the exegesis of the Jewish Talmudic scholar André Neher (1914-1988) Moyaert explains that Babel was not a curse, but a blessing. The main thing is not the building of a tower, it is the wish of the human beings to gather on one place. The theme of one language is complemented by the theme of one place. Where God wanted the human beings to disperse all over the earth, they decided to remain together. The circumstance that they all spoke the same language furthermore gave them the impression that they all understood one another completely. By confusing their language humankind was compelled to spread. The variety of languages is in accordance with God’s will, since this multiplicity made all humans aware of the fact that they often did not understand each other correctly, even if they spoke the same language. From now on they need a form of hermeneutics to comprehend the other. It is from this starting point that Moyaert develops her method based on the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005).

In the section about the hermeneutical method of Ricoeur the author shows that it is part of Christianity to translate its core concepts into other languages and other religious and cultural conceptual webs. She also points out that meeting people and being confronted with ideas derived from other religions is not always enriching. It can also be a threat. One’s religious identity can be at stake. Inter-religious dialogue can moreover challenge or even unsettle one’s self-understanding and one’s faith. Therefore inter-religious dialogue is not always easy. At the same time the Bible includes stories in which a stranger turns out to be God (Genesis 18). Hospitality is a virtue in the Bible. In fact, the Bible incites the believers to hermeneutical openness in the confidence that God also reveals Himself in other religions. ‘The other who asks to be understood and comprehended challenges the interpreter to listen and to make room in his own identity for the strange’ (p. 266). ‘Hermeneutical openness creates a kind of laboratory in which “other possible worlds” can be imagined. The imagination allows the subject to see matters differently’ (p. 268). People must be prepared to be transformed, but at the same time they have to ask what is essential to them. Therefore inter-religious dialogue is always an interaction between openness and commitment. The problem is that it is never clear when one has to be open to meet God in the strange, for not all strange phenomena reveal God, but at the same time it is unwise to imprison God in one’s own religious heritage, since God always transcends this tradition.

The last part of Moyaert’s publication is devoted to the feast. A feast is always different from everyday life. In a feast one has to be hospitable and open to do things differently and to be open to strange experiences. A feast also symbolises the hope for the Kingdom in the present, but it simultaneously points to the future.

Despite my appreciation of this book I also have two points of criticism. The first one concerns a remark in which Moyaert clearly betrays her Catholic background. On p. 113-114 she writes; ‘There is no direct, immediate access to God. The relationship with God is always mediated by concrete religious elements.’ I doubt whether this view is shared by all Christians. It would not surprise me that many Protestants have another feeling.